

Time and Again by lollercakes

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Summary:

Joyce Byers was the one that got away, time and again. After going their separate ways for years, fate has put them on a collision course that brings them back together. But can they figure it out and channel their chemistry, history, and the real shit - shared trauma - into something real?

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

A mish-mash of scenes which when combined tell a bunch of stories about how Hopper and Joyce finally pulled it together. Set after the end of ST2, this little batch of fics is more a collection of tied-together one shots for a couple I didn't really fall for until I realized I was in too deep to escape.

He was trying to give her space. Knew he had to, or else he may lose this makeshift family he was trying to piece together with tape and glue. So instead of haunting the entryway to the gym, Hopper stepped out into the brisk evening air and ran his hand anxiously through his hair.

Cool nights like this always sunk into his bones and made him weary, reminding him of the damp winters in New York and everything that he'd lost already.

He didn't want to think of it. Not now. Not with the forged birth certificate for "Jane" burning a hole in his wallet as she attended her first Snowball, his first loosening of the reigns since he took her in months ago. There was too much at stake this time and he knew they couldn't go back to the "Don't Be Stupid" rules that he had clung to to keep her safe. She needed this and he needed to let her have it or else the effects of his black hole luck would be of his own making, inevitably pushing her away permanently.

Pulling in a breath, he dropped his hands from his hips and looked across the parking lot to where Joyce's car was parked. He'd noticed it driving in, the small twinge of familiarity slipping up his spine with the certainty that she was here too, unable to stray too far from Will's side after everything that had happened recently. She was there, leaning against the side of the car all frazzled hair and crossed arms, her small frame belying the huge weight she carried taking care of her boys.

"Hey," he greeted, lumbering up beside her. Even through his jacket

he could feel the electricity emanating from her and he forced himself to trap it down - those feelings were echoes of another time. She'd just lost Bob and he could see the shadow of him hanging in her features, the loss still fresh.

"Hey." Her return was quiet, withdrawn, and he knew the feeling too well.

"Thought I might find you out here," Hopper added lightly, gaze scanning the area the way his training made him do. There were no puffs of breath among the cars telling of others in the lot and he felt his shoulders relax slightly.

"Will wanted me to give him space, so I'm giving him a few feet," she joked as their eyes met briefly. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled loose his pack of smokes and grinned.

"What do you say? I'm pretty sure Mr Cooper retired in the 70s, so I think we'll be okay," he offered, reaching his hand out to give her a light. She took it without question, a stuttering cough breaking out of her on the inhale before she handed it back to him. "How are you holding up?"

"Eh," Joyce replied lowly, looking away. Hopper could feel the ache of her sadness prickle at his skin but he refused to let the feeling push him away. He could do this for her.

"That feeling never goes away," he pauses, inhaling the smoke into his lungs. "But it is true what they say, it does get easier."

He knows it does. It hurts and it hurts until one day it just doesn't hurt as much. And then a few weeks after that, maybe it's a bit less. At least, that's what he knows from Sara. He knows the loss and the struggle and that's maybe why when he pulls Joyce into his chest he isn't just trying to make her pain go away, he's desperate to drown out his own.

Though it doesn't really explain then why he presses a kiss to the crown of her head.

Or why she doesn't pull away when he does.

2. Chapter 2

Hopper wakes up to the smell of her, his mind fuzzy as he looks around his sparse room for Joyce. She isn't there. He knows she never was. But still his dream had convinced him that she had been here lying next to him.

It was like a memory of another time when they had been thick as thieves, waking up after a night of debauchery in their last year of school. He'd been preparing to leave for Vietnam, trying to get his living out of the way before his draft came due when he and a few friends had run into Joyce out on the town. He didn't remember how it had happened, but he'd woken up with her hair in his face and instead of pulling away he'd tucked in closer.

When she'd finally come to with her head spinning from the hangover, he'd held that same mop of hair back from her face as she prayed to the porcelain gods. Then he'd drove her home and she started seeing Lonnie a week later.

They never really spoke about that night and he wasn't even sure if she even remembered it, but every so often he woke up to the familiar feeling and felt the loss of what never really was all over again.

The knock on his door has him rolling to sit on the side of the bed, his hands grasping for the rumpled shirt at the base of his bedside table. "Yeah, one sec," he calls out as he pulls the shirt on. When he opens the door, El is there with her backpack, her quiet stare focused on him.

"School," she states forcefully, her fingers playing with the sleeves of her plaid shirt and giving away her nerves. Hopper looks towards the clock and rubs his face.

"Yeah, I know. But kid, it's six in the morning, school isn't for a couple hours yet," he says, sighing and turning back into his room to start gathering his uniform pieces.

"Late. I don't want to be late," she adds awkwardly.

“Don’t worry - we’ll be on time. Now can you close the - “ The door clicks shut and he smiles to himself while grabbing a clean shirt from the closet.

He knew she’d be excited for today, he should have expected it. After more than a year of being hidden away, he had finally registered her in school using her new birth certificate and an excuse about how she’d been living with her mother until now. They’d worked hard with Nancy to try to bring her closer to the knowledge level she’d need in class, though it was still an uphill battle ahead of them. But he was confident she’d pick it up quickly with the help of Mike and the gang, as long as they could keep her real identity secret.

Exiting his room, he finds El perched on the arm of the couch with her backpack held tightly in her arms. “Now can we go? Flo has already messaged twice.”

“Did you eat breakfast? Most important meal of the day, you know.” He nods as he moves towards the cabin’s kitchen, ignoring her question purposely. He can feel her eyes on him, watching his every move as her anxiety builds. “El, come on, trust me. We’ll eat breakfast and then we’ll go. You want Eggos?”

That seems to do the trick, distracting her enough so that he’s able to have his coffee and eat without much of a rush before he finally loads them into the truck to go. Pulling up to the school, he barely gets a chance to say goodbye before Mike is pulling open the door and rambling on about how he’d expected her sooner. He watches with his stomach in his throat as she lifts her hand to him before disappearing into the school.

The feeling that rushes in takes him by surprise and he has to press his knuckles into his forehead to keep it contained. In a swift moment the loss of Sara and the missed chances to watch her grow up flood his mind and fill up the space leftover from concern for El’s identity. The emotion blocks out everything else and he’s overwhelmed by the force of it.

“Hop?” Joyce’s voice cuts through to him and he looks up from where he’d hid his face against the steering wheel. Without warning, she rounds to the passenger side and climbs in, her hand coming to

rest on his cheek. "What's wrong?" She prods, angst tightly wound up within her.

Shaking his head he sniffs and feels her hand brush the wetness from his tears away. "God Joyce, sorry," he groans, reaching for a handkerchief he keeps between the seats.

"Is everything okay?" She tries again, angling herself to be in his line of sight. He chuckles in between shakes of his head and smiles weakly.

"Yeah, just first day jitters, I guess," he adds lamely and pulls her hand away from where it rests on his beard. He doesn't let go of it though.

"Oh, I get that. The first day back after we found Will I was a wreck..." She laughs tightly and shrugs. "You'll get used to it. Maybe even look forward to it, sometimes."

"Yeah, I know. You caught me by surprise is all. Are we still on for dinner on Wednesday?" He was desperate to steer the conversation away from his ghosts, by any means, and while he knew the dinner would be on - they hadn't missed family dinner since the Snowball dance a few months ago - he felt like it was a neutral middle ground between them that would give him time to recover.

"Of course! Will wants to try to make lasagna, so if you and El want to bring some garlic bread or something," she says, shifting until she's leaning back against the door window with her hands clasped in her lap.

"Hopper - you there? Come in Hop - " Flo's voice fills the car, the police radio turned up loudly to be heard over his usual driving music.

"I guess I'll see you later," Joyce nods, her eyes darting away as that rare blinding smile breaks across her face. He tries not to stare. Tries.

"Yeah, I'll see you," he pauses as she turns to slide out of the truck. "Hey Joyce - "

"Yeah Hop?"

“Thanks.” He smiles, leaning down so he can see her for one more minute. The flare of colour in her cheeks fills him with warmth that lasts even after she shuts the door with a snap.

3. Chapter 3

“Joyce, look I’m sorry - “

“What is it Hop? What’s wrong?” Her voice crackles on the other end of the phone, as though she can already tell it’s going to be bad news. For a short second he wonders if he shouldn’t have waited until morning.

“It’s just El - there’s... She needs - “ He clears his throat anxiously and rubs the sleep from his eyes. He doesn’t want to say it. “She’s uh - I guess...”

“Oh. Oh! Hop, Jesus, grow up! You’re raising a teenage girl!” She chastises and he can hear her rustling as she grabs her coat.

Shifting on his feet, he leans against the wall and lowers his voice. “I can’t talk to her about it - she’s locked me out,” he hisses. Through the phone he can hear Joyce let out a bark of laughter.

“I’ll be over soon. Turn the porch light on so I can see where I’m going,” she instructs and hangs up to his sigh of relief.

Hopper didn’t know what he would do without Joyce at this moment. Sure, he could tell El all about the birds and the bees and spin some fairytale of womanhood, but she would see right through it. That wasn’t the kind of agreement they had, not with their whole “friends don’t lie” mantra. No, he would have to tell her everything and the idea made his chest hurt more than a bad heart attack.

Heading to the porch, he flipped on the light and then pulled out a chair at their front room table to pass the time working on the puzzle they were assembling. When he heard Joyce’s car rumble closer, its tell-tale muffler giving her away, he moved to greet her on the porch with an exhausted smile.

“You’re going to need to be able to buy these things on your own, Hop. I won’t always be willing to rush over here in the middle of the night with them,” she chides, stepping past him and taking her coat off.

"I know, I know! She locked herself in after I finally convinced her she wasn't dying," He says, grumbling with his hands on his hips.

"You what?" She laughs, looking at him with bright eyes.

"I told her she wasn't going to die! That this was a woman thing and she would have to get used to it. I didn't think - I didn't know she'd try to hideout forever." His voice drops to a whisper as he says it and he can feel the blood in his cheeks. This whole situation had been so clumsily handled, he felt like a fool.

"Well, okay. Let me see what I can do." Joyce sighs, gathering up her drugstore bag before knocking on the bathroom door. "El, it's Joyce, can I come in?" She asks gently through the wood.

"Only you?" Her small voice calls out quietly, hesitant.

"Yeah, only me. Promise," Joyce responds and gives a small smile to Hopper when the lock on the door clicks open.

He's not sure how long they're in there, but he wakes up on the couch to the creak of the floorboards as El darts back to her room, closing the door with a snap. Joyce comes to sit beside him with a huff, exhaustion playing at her features.

"Thank you for that," he mumbles and lifts his arm so she can settle into his side. It's awkward for a moment - a twinge of uncertainty between them - but then he feels her shoulders relax and her warmth slide up against his.

"She just needed to know what was going on is all. She didn't get the same info the rest of us got growing up."

"I don't think I got that info either," he jokes in return, pleased when she chuckles which causes her whole body to shake next to his. They let the comfortable silence between them draw out, the ticking of the old cuckoo clock on the wall and the crackle of the fireplace keeping them company.

Somewhere between the hypnotic flicker of the light and the smooth pattern of their breathing, they both drift off to sleep. When Hopper comes to as the clock chimes midnight, he's surprised to look down

to find Joyce stretched alongside him with her fingertips rustling in his beard.

“Hey,” he whispers, her eyes sliding up to meet his with a sheepish look.

“Sorry, I was - “

“Feeling me up, yeah, it’s okay, I know,” he says with a smile, watching her while forcing his body to relax under hers. He doesn’t want her to go anywhere or scare her off. He likes this. Too much, maybe.

“I guess we kinda fell asleep,” she adds after a moment. Neither of them have moved, though neither will say why, the unspoken words between them. Maybe it’s the history, or the battles they’ve faced together that have bound them but made them unwilling to face the step ahead. Or maybe it’s the the ghosts that haunt them, their stories crowding out the possibilities that could be.

“Mhmm... Probably one of the better sleeps I’ve had in awhile,” he admits and lets his fingers slide down her side. In response her body curls in closer, her leg settling between his and her hand tucking under her chin. For a second, neither of them risk a breath, unwilling to break the spell.

They lay there like that, entwined together in a cocoon of warmth and quiet, as time moves forward. Occasionally their hands shift and absently explore, curiosity driving them past the point of concern for overstepping the careful friendship they’ve created over the past few months.

He wouldn’t admit it out loud but the comfort of her touch and the way sleep plays at her features in the fading light makes his chest ache. To say he missed this was an understatement. The feeling of someone beside him not in a haze of drink and smoke but as something more careful, more timid, reminded him of a time years ago when it was Diane who laid beside him.

Only now it was Joyce. And the history between them could cripple whatever they were on the edge of doing. And he wasn’t sure if he

could take another loss of people into his black hole.

“I should really stock the fire back up,” he whispers eventually as his hand comes to rest against her jaw. Smiling slightly, she presses back against his hand and looks away from him. His eyes stay trained on her lips, his instinct pushing him to close the distance, but his head holds him back.

“Yeah. And I should probably get home to the boys. Jonathan was looking after Will but I don’t like leaving them home alone at night,” Joyce adds with a heavy sigh, pulling away and moving slowly to sit up. The instant distance between them floods the space with cool air and the bubble around them pops, breaking the spell.

Neither of them really speak as they move towards the door, Hopper handing Joyce her jacket and watching as she pulls loose her hair from the collar. Following her out onto the porch, he shoves his hands into his pockets to keep them from pulling her back to him. He wants to, badly, but he knows he can’t.

“Thanks for helping us out tonight. I don’t know what I would have done -”

“You would have figured it out. But I’m glad you called. I... This was nice,” she pauses and the steam from her breath hangs in the air. He feels his nails bite into his palm as he fights to keep his hands to himself. “I’ll see you soon. Night Hop.” When she meets his eyes again as she steps off the porch, he knows he’s a goner. Maybe he always was.

4. Chapter 4

The Wheelers are hosting their annual Memorial Day barbeque and Hopper is chafing at the idea of going. He's never had to attend before, having never really had an obligation to go anywhere until they invited El and he was expected to accompany her. The whole concept seemed ridiculous but Karen Wheeler was hellbent on making sure their family kept the parents friendly for their kids' sakes.

God, he hated stuff like this.

"What do we do at this thing?" El asks from her place on the passenger side of the truck. Hopper shrugs and shifts in his seat.

"No idea, kid. This is my first time too," he adds with a smirk. Maybe he'll get lucky and it'll be the only time he's expected to go.

"Mike said it's just a bunch of adults drinking and making stupid jokes," she pauses and turns slightly to face him, a serious look on her face. "Do you know any jokes?"

"Yeah kid, I know some jokes. Don't worry - I won't embarrass you. Do we need a code word if you want to leave?" Though he knows she'll likely not need it with Mike and the gang around, he also knows that social situations can be overwhelming for her and he wants her to know she always has an out if she needs it. That's part of their deal now - trust and honesty with steadfast support.

And hell, maybe he'll need to use the code word too.

"Pancake," she insists after giving it some thought. His returning chuckle feels good as it breaks through some of his nerve.

"Got it. If you start talking about Eggos I won't say a thing but one word about pancakes and we're out of there." They pull up to the curb across the street and stare at the house, their shared anxiousness creating a tight silence between them. "Are you ready for this?"

"Yes." Her confidence blooms again, the momentary hesitation

disappearing from her features as she steels herself.

They've barely exited the truck before Mike's head is poking out the front door and waving her over. Hopper takes a more leisurely pace, following the sounds of people into the backyard where the parents are sipping drinks in their summer clothes. Karen greets him first, an overly loud gesture giving away her tipsy status as she plants kisses on both his cheeks.

"I'm so glad you could make it!" She laughs, turning to where her husband stands at the grill. "Ted, get the Chief a beer!" Ted pretends not to hear them as his infamous obliviousness shines while he talks to the Sinclair's.

"It's alright Karen, I've got it," Joyce breaks in, a beer already in hand for him.

"You are such a delight, Joyce, thank you! God, Ted, what are you even doing? The meat is burning!" Karen chastises as she turns away from them and back towards where Ted is currently not-manning the grill. Hopper tries to stifle a laugh but the smile breaks free uncontrollably and soon him and Joyce are laughing heartily at the familial conflict happening before them.

"So, you missed dinner again this week," Joyce starts when the laughter dies down. He knew this was coming - it was part of the reason he'd almost stayed home - but he also knew he couldn't avoid it anymore. He had missed dinner for the last few weeks and his excuses were getting lamer by the day.

"Yeah, sorry about that. Work stuff," he adds while trying to lean casually against a fencepost. He can't pull it off and has to recover quickly from almost falling on his ass.

"I don't believe that, but okay," she sighs and shakes her head, disappointment apparent in her tone.

He knows he shouldn't lie to her - that she deserves more - but he also knows the truth would start something that he couldn't quite see how it would play out. And in all honesty, he wasn't willing to risk their friendship. It had been less than a year since Bob died and he

didn't want to be *that* guy to Joyce. He couldn't let another slip like their evening on the couch happen again, at least not while the loss was still fresh. His own loss was old and scabbed, but he knew what it was like when it was fresh and didn't want to push her into something they would regret.

So instead he fibbed. Sent El over for the dinners and then went and hid out at the station. Pretended to have paperwork to do but in reality took a nap in his desk chair.

It was pathetic. But it had to happen.

"Can I count on you to host it this coming week? I'm covering a shift for Marg at the store and I don't want to break the habit for the boys if I can help it," she prompts, somehow successfully finding a way to lean against the fence and look good doing it. Taking a sip of his beer, he nods and makes a mental note to remember as Claudia Henderson pulls Joyce into a conversation.

Later, a beer or two in, he ambles himself over to a blanket under a tree and sits down to eat his meal in peace. He's mid-way through his burger when Joyce flops down next to him, a red plastic cup in hand with its contents nearly sloshing over the edge.

"Why are you ignoring me?" She hisses under her breath, barely audible to him between chews. He sets his plate down on the blanket and looks her over.

"How much have you had to drink Joyce?" He asks as he takes her cup from her loose grip. A quick sniff tells him all he needs to know - vodka and Kool-Aid, her kryptonite.

"Don't avoid the question, Hop! I'm sober enough to know when you're being evasive," she adds and shifts until her back is against the tree and her head has rolled to face him.

"I'm not avoiding you, I promise." He tries but there's no derailing her now.

"You are though. I know you're not busy at the station - Flo told me you go there and sleep. I thought we were doing okay. I mean, I

thought -” Shaking her head, she takes her cup back and downs the rest of her drink. He’s too slow to react when she sets the cup down and moves to her knees, her hands finding his shirt and pulling him in for a kiss that had he blinked he would have missed it. “I thought that was where we were going. But I guess I was just wrong!” She smiles sadly after pulling away and then gets to her feet, brushing off her pants before calling for Jonathan and Will.

He sits there frozen as Joyce walks purposefully towards the house while her sons poke their heads out the door to see what’s going on. After a hushed discussion the boys join her as they say goodbye and head for the driveway.

Stunned, Hopper sits there watching as Joyce disappears around the side of the house. The memory of a time just like this, one from when they were teenagers, comes rushing back to him and knocks the air from his chest.

He remembers it so clearly now - how Joyce had been sitting in the front seat of his car, her lips pressed to his hand because she wouldn’t dare try to kiss him after spending the morning being sick. How she’d tried to tell him how she felt but he’d brushed it off, blaming it on the hangover when it was his unwillingness to start something with Vietnam hanging so closely over his head.

Hopper couldn’t let her walk away again, not after everything they’d been through.

Quickly getting to his feet, he abandoned his lunch on the blanket and jogged out of the yard and onto the street where Jonathan was trying to get the keys from Joyce.

“Come on Mom, you know you can’t drive,” Jonathan soothes, hand held tightly over hers.

“I’m fine,” she groans and shakes her head, stumbling. Hopper watches for a moment before stepping towards them with his hands on his hips.

“Joyce,” he calls lowly, eyes squinting in the light of the afternoon. He watches as her shoulders drop, Jonathan finally able to secure the

keys from her grip. "Can we talk?"

"I'll just wait in the car," Jonathan adds, looking between the two with a small smile.

"Look, Joyce," Hopper tries to keep his voice quiet to keep any semblance of privacy that he can. Without a doubt the situation was likely causing some minor embarrassment for them both and he didn't want to enflame that. "I didn't - "

"You know Hop, I shouldn't have done that," she interrupts, rounding on him and stepping quickly until she's at his feet with her finger pointed at his chest. He's seen Joyce angry before, has seen her fight for everything with a fierceness he couldn't match, but he's never seen her like this and he's taken aback. "I got carried away. But you know what, I'm tired of being a bookend for people. I don't need it from you! Bob never treated me like I was a placeholder and that's why I liked him. But dammit, he's gone and I thought we had another chance but now you're screwing it up again and I won't - "

He doesn't know what causes him to do it, his mind clearly losing touch with reality, but his hands bracket her face and before he realizes he's pulling her in for a proper kiss that's nothing like the fleeting blink of a kiss she cornered him with before. When he finally pulls back her face is unreadable and for a second he's convinced he's made the wrong move.

But then she's kissing him. Her hands find purchase in his button-up shirt as she pulls him to her, pressing together in the summer heat.

"What the hell?" Dustin barks from somewhere in the distance, the awareness of the location coming back to Hopper in a rush. The potential vulnerability of their situation blooms inside him, thoughts for what El will think starting to creep in. But still he holds Joyce's chin in his palms, their foreheads touching as their eyes meet.

"I didn't realize I wasn't the only one, I'm sorry," Hopper whispers as his thumb brushes her cheek softly. "I wanted to give you space. I didn't want this to be a fling because I couldn't stand it if I lost you after everything we've been through. I want more but I'm willing to wait. I'm a patient man, Joyce, but I want you to be sure," he adds,

pulling back and looking to where Jonathan is grinning broadly from his place in the driver's seat. Behind him, Will has his face pressed to the window with his mouth open in surprise.

When he looks back at Joyce, she's standing with her arms across her chest, one hand running a finger across her lips as she stares towards the backyard where the barbeque continues on.

"Okay," she nods, breaking the silence. Hopper frowns, suddenly unsure of everything as he watches her closely. Her posture becomes determined as her gaze slides up to meet his. "I'll call you, Hop. I need to think."

He takes her words in like a punch to the chest, the breath leaving his lungs as she walks carefully back to the car. When she looks back, her smile washes over him and reminds him how much of a goner he is. He's patient, but he's also fucking terrified.

5. Chapter 5

She doesn't call him. The weekly dinner happens but it's Jonathan who drives him and Will over to Hopper's place and they don't bring up Joyce throughout the meal.

Later, when El is helping to wash the dishes after the boys have left, she's the first to bring up the incident from the barbecue.

"I don't want a new Mama," she states absently and Hopper freezes, his grip tightening on the dishcloth he holds.

"Oh?" It squeaks out of him, his heart beating heavily. He would die for this kid, her approval is everything to him, but the fear of her not wanting Joyce in their lives breaks him inside.

"She couldn't be my Mama. Nobody else ever could be. But I'd be okay if she was my Joyce." El stops rinsing a plate to look up at him with her blatant honesty. "Mike and Will were talking about you at school and Will and I talked and it would be okay if maybe - I don't know. I would be okay if Joyce was my pretend Mama. Like you're my pretend dad."

Hopper feels like the Grinch with his heart growing out of his chest with every word that El speaks. As though a weight has been lifted, he sets down the dishcloth and pulls her in for a hug. When they pull apart he ruffles her hair and stays crouched at her level.

"No one will replace your Mama, I promise," he says carefully, eyes searching hers. "I don't know what's going to happen with Joyce, but I appreciate you saying that."

"Appreciate?" She frowns, her head cocking slightly to the side in her usual search for an explanation. He chuckles, returning to his spot drying the dishes.

"Yeah, like, I value your opinion and I'm happy you support it. We're family now, or at least I think so, and I hope you feel the same. We're in this together."

“Okay. So does that mean you are going to call her?” El questions as she too turns back to the sink.

“No. I’m going to be patient and wait for her to call me.”

“That sounds stupid.”

“Oh yeah?” He pauses, stopping to lean against the counter as he faces El.

“Yeah. If you both like each other, what are you even doing? It seems inevitable,” she adds and shakes her head, the grown up reaction throwing him off.

“Inevitable, eh? Where’d you learn that word?”

“Dustin. He said you and Joyce were inevitable. Did I use it right?”

“Yeah kid, you did,” Hopper nods and takes the glass from her hand to dry as a smile lights his features.

6. Chapter 6

“Flo, has J - “

“No, Chief. If you ask me again, I’ll ban donuts from the station permanently. Just call her already - would you?” Flo chastises him as he pases by her desk for the third time that day.

Grumbling, he heads to his office with coffee in hand and sits heavily in his chair. He doesn’t want to look at the files on his desk, the petty cases uninteresting to him as he leans back and sips at his coffee.

It’s been over a week since the barbeque and he’s growing more nervous with every day that passes. He figured she would have called him by now, she wasn’t a cruel woman, but she still hadn’t reached out. So much for being a patient man, he realized.

To be honest, he never should have kissed her. He could have gone on without her for months if he hadn’t felt what it was like to have her in his arms and her lips on his. No, that was definitely the mistake he’d made and now he had to live with it.

And the dreams.

God, he needed to get her out of his head. Joyce had him tangled up in knots and he couldn’t remember feeling this way, even with Diane. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt like he was helpless to solve his own problems and he’d done two tours in the war.

“Fuck,” he hissed, setting down his coffee and getting up to pace his office. Pausing at the window he watched as a car similar to Joyce’s pulled into the parking lot. Immediately his blood started to pound until a lanky teenager he didn’t recognize emerged from the driver’s side. “That’s it, I can’t do this.”

Returning to his desk, he grabbed for his hat and shoved it onto his head before walking swiftly out of the building. He made it to the store where Joyce worked in record time, his truck practically parking itself as he pulled into a spot across the street. Through the window he could see Joyce behind the till as she rung through a

customer. As soon as the man left the store Hopper forced a calming breath into his lungs and made his way into the shop.

“Hey Joyce, just gotta grab some stuff, I’ll be out of your hair in a second,” he lies, wandering down an aisle and pulling items off the shelf without looking at them. What was he even *doing here*? He was being ridiculous. They had an agreement and he was breaking it.

“Are you really going to take care of a Chia Pet, Hopper?” Joyce says from her perch on the store ladder. He hadn’t even realized she’d climbed up it, so desperate he was to keep up this charade that he was oblivious to how hard it would be to run into her when she was four feet in the air. Sighing audibly, he looks down at what’s in his hand and feels the heat rise to his cheeks - thankful in that second that his beard covers most of his embarrassment.

“Yeah. I mean, it was a gift, for El,” he adds lamely, pretending to read the instructions and act casual in front of the woman who has him all tied up inside.

“Good. Cause I thought you were here to see me,” she says under her breath, stepping up another rung. He turns to face her head on then, his hand setting the plant back on the shelf in defeat.

“I lied. You didn’t call.” The pathetic hint to his tone makes him cringe internally. Though he’s always been an honest man, he finds himself wishing he could lie his way out of this situation. Why was this so hard? He’d done this all before and stayed cool - why was this so different?

Because this mattered. And he knew what it was like to lose something that mattered and he couldn’t do it again.

“I’m sorry -” His heart drops at her words, all of his strength threatening to leave him as he stands empty handed. “I meant to, but I didn’t know how to say what I want to say.”

He needs to hold it together. Needs to breathe through the pain in his chest. But he can’t. She doesn’t want this - she doesn’t want him.

“Okay. No problem,” he forces from his lips, though from where he

found those words within him he's not sure. Joyce shifts on the rung, turning half her body to frown at him.

"No problem? What? Hop, I - "

"You don't have to say it, Joyce. It's okay." She shakes her head and throws her hands up in the air, seemingly losing track of where she is or what she's doing. From where he stands it's like they both realize what a mistake that was one second too late - Joyce's hands flail in the air and she tumbles backwards, her feet slipping from the rungs and her small frame sliding off of the ladder and onto the floor with a thump.

"Oh god," she groans as he drops beside her a second too late to catch her fall.

"Joyce - fuck, are you hurt?" He questions the obvious, his training failing him. "What were you thinking?"

"I hit my - ow!" She screeches as his fingers prod her leg, the one that had somehow gotten caught up in a rung of the ladder. He turns just in time to see the fear flicker across her face as the tears rush in, adrenaline pumping and pain starting to bloom. His mind automatically fills with Sara, the look she had when her first symptoms started, and he has to blink away the memory.

"Did you hit your head?" He questions, concern lacing through him as he checks for bumps along her skull.

"No, but - " She hiccups as she focuses on catching her breath, eyes trained on the ceiling to fight against the burning pain. "I think I hurt my - "

"Arm - yeah, no - don't look," he pulls a towel from a nearby shelf and covers her torso from sight. "I'm going to call the ambulance. Don't move."

When he returns she's crying silently, her eyes closed and her body already starting to bruise on its visible skin. Kneeling beside her he pushes the hair away from her face and shakes his head.

"It's going to be okay," he soothes and cups her cheek in his hand, a

thumb brushing away the tears.

“I fell off a ladder.”

“I know. I saw. But you’ll be okay.” She laughs in between her sobs and he tries not to smile at her reaction. Of course Joyce would laugh at a moment like this - she was stronger than hell and undefeatable. He just wishes she’d held on better so they could have finished their conversation.

Notes for the Chapter:

Much love to the people who stumble on this and find enjoyment from it. Keep being great <3

7. Chapter 7

Though her recovery was progressing well, they'd kept Joyce overnight to keep an eye on her and make sure she didn't have a concussion. It had been a simple suggestion then that Hopper and El move into the Byers home until Joyce was released from the hospital and back on her feet. Staying with Lonnie wasn't an option and someone had to care for the boys, so he figured it might as well be him.

"I thought I would never get out of there," Joyce sighs from the front seat as Hopper slides in beside her. He'd made sure the kids got off to school and had stopped by the hospital before heading to the station only to be surprised by the news that she was free to go.

"Are you sure they said you could leave?" He asks again, looking her over carefully. He'd helped her up the step into the truck, her grunts of pain making him question the doctor's decisions even though she'd insisted she was fine.

"Yes, Hop, I promise." Shaking his head, he turns the engine over and inches his way out of the parking lot, careful to avoid the potholes and bumps as best he can. "I'm not going to break. You can drive normally," she chides when they're halfway down the street moving at an achingly slow pace.

"Don't mock me, Joyce, I'm trying to take care of you," Hopper grumbles in return and spares a glance her way. She smiles back at him, her hand coming to rest on his thigh.

"Thank you," she mumbles as his hand comes to cover hers.

"You had me scared," he admits quietly when they finally round onto her street.

"What do you mean? You saw it happen, it wasn't like I was going to die or anything." Her words are flippant and he can only shake his head in response.

"I'm not talking about that." Hopper doesn't want to bring it up, but

the unfinished conversation has him rattled and he can't stop thinking about it.

"Then what are you - oh..." He looks over at her as she pauses mid-sentence, her eyes widening. "Hop, I didn't fall off the ladder on purpose!"

"I didn't think you did - but we never did finish it talking about us, did we?" He smiles as he says it, pulling into her driveway and putting the truck in park. Turning to her, he takes his hat off and sets it on the dash, a hand fitfully running through his hair. "Look, Joyce, I'm still going to help you out regardless of what you say because we're friends and that's what friends do for each other, but I need you to talk to me. Tell me what you're thinking because if we don't talk about this I'm going to drive myself insane thinking about it."

He finishes with a flourish, his body shifting in the driver's seat anxiously. Joyce tries to suppress a laugh, this strong man seemingly coming apart at the seams before her.

"You weren't letting me finish what I was saying at the store. I was *trying* to tell you that I didn't know how to say that I wanted you without sounding like a desperate fool but you just kept assuming the worst and - "

"Interrupting - "

"Yes, interrupting," she holds up her good hand, a finger raised to silence him. "I wanted to tell you that I want you in my life, black hole and all. And I want El in my life and you in my boys' lives. I want to try this stupid thing because we've messed it up already before and we deserve to try it now when the time is right. But I didn't know how to tell you that without - I don't know - fucking it all up. I want you but I didn't have the words - "

"Then no more words," he interrupts again only this time she doesn't mind because his hand is on her cheek and his body is leaned into hers. The kiss is light, unassuming, and when he pulls back he can't stop grinning as he takes in the sight of her eyes closed and her lips left slightly ajar.

His mind is spinning as he slips out of the driver's seat to come and open her door. Helping her down from the truck, he keeps a hand on the small of her back as she tries to stand. When she can't manage the crutch and the sling at the same time he chuckles under his breath and scoops her up into his arms, her small frame easy for him.

"Never thought I'd do another bridal carry in my life," he jokes as he pushes their way through the front door with his mood flying high. She laughs and then moans, her bruised ribs aching with the movement.

"I want to go lay down. I'm still tired," she says when they pass through the living room.

"Got it," he grunts and moves towards her room. Setting her on the edge of the bed he pulls back the covers until she can scoot underneath them, his hands gently tucking the blanket around her. "Can I get you anything else?" He asks lamely as he squats down next to the bedside table. Automatically, his mind's eye recalls when they'd last been here just after Bob's death and he has to force the thought out of his head - that was the past and they had to move forward.

"Do you have to go to the station?" Joyce asks as she tucks her face against the pillow, the bright white of the cast tucked under her chin.

"I'm supposed to - why? Are you in pain?" He shoves his hands into his pockets and pulls out the pills he'd grabbed from the pharmacy before they'd left the hospital. Mid-instruction reading, her hand comes out and tugs at his shirt, pulling his attention back to her.

"The medicine they gave me before I left - it makes my mind do funny things. I don't want to be alone." Her whispered words are tentative and embarrassed, her honesty putting her rare vulnerability on display for him.

"Joyce," he leans forward until he's on his knees, his torso leaning over the bed as his fingers run along her chin. "You're safe here. Tucked in bed and all bandaged up. Nothing can get you now." She nods and pulls the blanket closer into her chest. "There's my strong girl," he sighs as she sucks in a shaking breath and laces her fingers

with his.

They stay there like that until his knees ache and he has to get to his feet again, careful to pull away and not disturb the light sleep that Joyce has been able to slip into. Heading for the hallway, he stops in the kitchen and lifts the phone to his ear before dialing the station.

“Hey Flo, yeah look - Joyce was released today so I’m going to stay here and help her - Yeah, I know. Look, can you have one of the guys bring over the paperwork on my desk? Great - thanks.” He finishes the call and turns to make himself some lunch.

Setting himself up on the couch with the folders, he starts pouring over his work as he finishes his food. It’s just after one when he hears the cries from Joyce’s room, his body reacting like a bullet from a gun as he comes to shake her out of the nightmare. When she settles back down, he decides that it would be easier to just setup here and retrieves the files from the living room before climbing onto the empty spot on the bed. For another few hours he reads and stands guard, ready to bring her back from the bad dreams that plague her after the past year’s horrors.

It’s nearly the end of the school day when she comes back to, surprise and confusion mixing as she lifts her head from Hopper’s lap where she’d curled up to sometime over the afternoon. He doesn’t move, a slight snore emanating from him as she notices he’s fallen asleep too. She debates waking him but chooses instead to watch him sleep, the relaxed look on his face one she rarely gets to see anymore. When he startles himself awake not too long after, her pained laugh makes him jump and he looks down with a grimace.

“The kids will be home soon,” she says as she slides to the edge of the bed. He helps her to the kitchen where they settle themselves at the table and share a cigarette, the action familiar and comforting to them both. When the boys and El spill through the front door, Joyce forces herself to her feet and attempts to greet them. Hopper can only watch as she ends up leaning against a wall, the pain visible on her face while they surround her for light hugs.

They slip into their evening routine easily after that, Jonathan getting dinner started as Will and El work on their homework together in the

living room. It happens so quickly and seamlessly that Joyce finds herself at a loss as she watches from her place at the kitchen table.

"I'm so glad you're here," she says later, the painkillers starting to kick in again and make her woozy. Hopper helps her to the corner of her bed, opening her drawers and pulling out pajamas for her. She takes them and breathes them in, closing her eyes in the process. "Home. These smell like home."

"You are home, Joyce," he replies lightly. "Are you okay to handle this on your own?" She looks up at him with a shy smile and he shakes his head, colour filling his cheeks.

"I can try," she laughs and grabs for the edge of her shirt, pulling it up without a care.

"Joyce, geez, one sec." He has to stuff his laughter back inside as he steps to the door and closes it silently. Without a doubt her painkillers are working as he watches her body sway slowly side to side. Hopper knows he should give her privacy - leave or close his eyes or do *something*, but he can't look away when she reaches back to try to release the hooks of her bra.

"Dammit. The nurse helped me this morning and I can't - Hop, help me!" She groans, her fingers wiggling in their cast uselessly. Shoving his selfish need away he moves back towards the bed and kneels down behind her, his hands making quick work of the hooks. Determinedly he pulls the pajama top from the pile and pulls it over her head so as to not give himself a chance to take in any more than he has to, trying with all of his focus to maintain a semblance of privacy for her.

Though he wants to see her - to see all of her - he wants it to be when they're both participants and not when she's flying high on painkillers.

"These too?" Joyce says as she turns slightly, her eyes looking over her shoulder as she holds up the pajama pants. Hopper swears internally, swallowing his words back as he moves to stand in front of her.

“Okay, up you come,” he instructs and lifts her up against his chest. She sways for a moment but manages to lock her knees and stay upright, thankfully allowing him to move his hands to her waistband. As he pulls the fabric down over her cast he finds himself face-level with her belly button, his shoulders being used to stabilize her above him. Taking the pants from her hands, he grins up at her from his place on his knees and taps her good leg lightly. “This will be easier if you sit down,” he sighs and she flops down dramatically.

Holding in his laughter, tightening the reigns on his desire, he navigates the fabric over the thick cast around her leg and tries to ignore the burst of want that streaks through him when her uninjured foot lifts to play at his shoulder. When finally he’s able to move past the cast, he grabs at her free ankle and jerks it towards him, her torso jolting upright with a shocked look on her face. They watch each other, a playful glint in his eyes as Hopper’s hands move over her calf, his beard dragging and catching against the hairs on her leg as he slides the fabric up and over her knee.

“Last part,” he whispers, reaching for her hand and helping her stand again. His hands make quick work of sliding the pants the rest of the way up her legs but when he’s finished he doesn’t move right away, instead looking up at her from his knees. The moment stretches out as their gazes lock, all playfulness from earlier fading as his arms wrap around her waist and he presses his forehead into her waist.

“Hop,” she sighs, her fingers running through his hair as he presses a kiss to her bellybutton over the fabric. When he does eventually pull away she loses her balance and falls back onto the bed, her body overwhelmed by the buzz from the drugs and the mix of his scent surrounding her. “Thank you for helping me,” she adds as she shifts the blankets, turning to look at him as he stands above her.

Hopper can feel himself falling quickly and forces himself to step back, his hands coming to rest on his hips as he watches her. He knows he should leave, but his feet are frozen, waiting for something, anything, to happen.

“Do you want - “ She pauses and looks away from him for a second, her tongue coming out to smooth over her lips. “Will you stay here tonight?”

“Yeah, of course,” he answers quickly, automatically. “I’ve figured out the comfortable spot on the couch. El is using the pull-out. We’re here as long as - “

“You know that’s not what I meant,” she interjects and looks pointedly up at him, her eyes searching his. “Hop - “

“You’re on a lot of meds right now, Joyce. I don’t want you to make a choice - “

“I’m not - “

“You are! You’ve hurt yourself and you’re not thinking straight and -”

“Stop making my decisions for me, Jim,” Joyce finishes and struggles to sit up in the bed, hissing at the pain. “Come here.” She pats the bed beside her and waits patiently until he comes to sit down. “I remember telling you earlier that I don’t want to waste time and yet here you are, holding out on me again.”

“I’m not holding out. I just don’t want to be something you regret,” he admits with a shrug of his shoulders. The honesty of his words speaks volumes and causes her to turn towards him slowly.

“Nobody would regret choosing you,” she whispers and entwines her fingers with his.

“They do though. I’m fucking cursed. I’ve got a black hole around me that just sucks everything in. It already took Sara and Diane and you...”

“I’m right here, Hop. It didn’t take me.” He shakes his head and looks at her then, seeing the beautiful woman who had been through more than anyone should have to go through and come out on the other side. “I want you, James Hopper. I have since we were fifteen and it seemed impossible. But look at us now - we’ve been through hell and back and somehow you’re sitting here on my damn bed. It isn’t the drugs talking right now, it’s me, only me, and I’m not going to let this - “

Leaning towards her in a rush, he presses his lips to hers until they’re falling back on the bed, a mess of limbs crashing together. Somehow

her words have transfixed him, reminding him that there's still time to be human and that he doesn't need to think through every worst case scenario every time. Sometimes he just has to live through it.

When her fingers find their way into his belt loops he follows their lead and rolls until he's cradled between her legs, his body tight and hovering above hers as he tries not to aggravate her injuries. She won't stand for it though and sighs before chastising him.

"I won't break," she whispers as his nose nudges along her jaw. Her good hand pulls at his hip until he collapses onto her, breathless at the contact and relieved when he doesn't immediately pull away. It's minutes - maybe hours - before her hiss of pain as his hand slides against her bruised ribs forces him to sit up on his knees, his gaze measuring her through a haze of want.

"When I'm all healed up, I'm going to jump you," Joyce laughs weakly, her eyes closed as he leans down to press kisses along each rib.

"You won't need to. You can have me whenever you want. I'm yours," he mumbles as he moves to stand by the side of the bed, pulling his shirt over his head. In a moment of uncertainty he looks down at her while his hands fiddle with the button on his jeans, pausing. "This is okay, right? Me staying here, tonight?" Her returning smile makes his skin hot and he wastes no time shucking his pants and crawling back down beside her, their bodies curling together as the drugs pull her under.

8. Chapter 8

“Hopper, can you come over?” Will’s voice whispers over the phone line, barely audible over the white noise on the line. Hopper looks at the clock over the stove and frowns. What was Will doing call him at midnight?

“What’s going on, kid?” He twists the cord in his hand and leans around the corner, glancing at where El has fallen asleep with a headache on the couch in front of the TV.

They’d moved back into the cabin a few days after Joyce had returned home. She’d gotten the hang of her recovery quickly and found workarounds to most of her challenges which meant Hopper didn’t need to be there all the time. It had been a bittersweet move, if he was being honest. Though they’d both determined they were going to try whatever it was they were doing, they also acknowledged that their decisions impacted more than just them and keeping their houses separate - for now - was important.

Plus, he didn’t know how many more nights he could spend tucked up next to her before he lost his damn mind. Despite sharing the bed every night he’d been there they hadn’t had the courage to get past high school level antics with the kids in the house. They’d relegated themselves to making out and the heavy petting of their youth and it just wasn’t enough. He wanted her, all of her, and they hadn’t yet figured that part out.

“It’s - “ Hopper hears a crash on the other end of the line, muffled voices in the background before Will swears into the phone. “Hopper - please - Dad is here.”

The words catch him off guard, disbelief filling his features. “Are you sure? Cause, kid, it’s midnight and -”

“Can you come now?” Will interrupts more urgent than before. The muffled voices from earlier grow louder and then it’s Hopper’s turn to swear.

“I’m on my way,” he affirms and hangs up. Stepping towards the

couch he leans over El and gently rouses her awake. "Hey - I've got to run over to Joyce's. Will you be okay here?"

"What's going on?" She mumbles, sleep tinged and blurry eyed.

"Probably nothing. I'll call if I'm going to be more than an hour, okay?" He makes for the door, grabbing his keys as she nods and stumbles into her room to head to bed. Though this isn't the first time she's been on her own at night - far from it - Hopper hates to leave her alone if he can help it, determined to be a decent parental figure for her.

While he wouldn't say he's rushing over, it could definitely be argued that he shows up faster than normal. The rain that was before just trickling has turned into a downright pouring situation when he arrives, his shoes soaking through as he steps down out of his truck and trudges past Lonnie's car.

He knocks twice before he starts pounding at the door, turning the handle and finding it locked. The feel of the situation makes the hair on the back of his neck stand up, the unusual scenario making him worry when still no one answers after another minute.

"Will?" Hopper shouts through the door, stepping to peer through the window. He sees the shadows in the kitchen and hears music playing over the heavy fall of the rain before he leaves the porch and heads around back.

Coming up to the kitchen door Hopper stops short as he looks into the house, his gaze falling on first the liquor bottle and then Lonnie and Joyce at the table sharing a cigarette. He tries in that instant not to let the feeling of betrayal that floods him take over - he knows Joyce and he knows this likely isn't what it seems - but still it burns.

Stepping to the door he knocks again, sucking in a calming breath as he watches Lonnie get to his feet and stumble towards the door.

"Chief! To what do we owe this unfortunate visit?" Lonnie slurs as he leans into the door jam. Hopper pushes past him into the house and out of the rain, his hand slicking his wet hair out of his face.

“Hop! What are you - “ Joyce jolts from her chair and lurches towards him, her small frame tighter than a wind up toy. “This isn’t what it looks like.” She states as she reaches her arms out towards him, her hands coming to rest on his where they sit on his hips.

“Yeah Chief - what the fuck are you doing here? Do you know what time it is?” Lonnie barks at him as he sidles up next to where Joyce stands. Joyce shifts a hip and steps away from him, disgust colouring her features.

Hopper watches the exchange with as much control as he can muster, biting his cheek to give him time to think. “I could ask you the same thing, Lonnie,” Hopper smiles forcefully, his head cocking to the side.

“He came over drunk - I didn’t know - “ Joyce attempts to explain but is hushed by Lonnie’s finger poking her nose, nearly hitting her eye.

“Shut up, Joycie. I’m visiting *my* family, Hop. Maybe you should head on home to yours? Oh right, yours is - “ Lonnie doesn’t get the chance to finish that sentence, Hopper’s fist swinging and connecting with his temple in a perfect right hook. The crack of the impact is audible over the music and Lonnie goes down hard, his body landing with a thump.

“Hop!” Joyce shouts, stepping between them with her arms stretched out wide. Hopper turns on his heel and shakes out his hand, the pain riddling up his arm.

“Will called me, Joyce. I know it isn’t - I mean, even if it was I’m not judging you I just - “

“No, it’s not like that. I swear, Hopper. He was drunk when he got here and then I didn’t want him driving anywhere and hitting someone so I’ve been trying to get him sobered up enough to drive. I didn’t know what else to do,” she groans and looks down at her ex-husband, her bum foot poking into his shoulder. When he doesn’t move she looks back up at him, her gaze searching his.

For a moment they stand there with a million words unspoken, their separate histories rearing their ugly heads. His dead daughter. Her violent husband. Two worlds that were miles apart and yet still

connected.

“How’s your fist? Can I get you some ice?” She asks gently, her hands coming to grasp his and examining the torn skin on his knuckles.

“I say we let the air out of his tires and let him sleep it off in the car tonight. What do you think?” He suggests as Joyce sighs and hugs herself.

“It sounds like our best option,” she agrees after a moment. “Let me get my coat.”

Hopper tote’s Lonnie out to his car, sliding him into the backseat and leaving his keys on the deflated tires as Joyce watches from the porch. After, when she has double checked all of the windows to ensure they’re locked, they find themselves sitting together on the couch. Though they’re only a few feet apart Hopper could swear that they stood on opposite ends of the Grand Canyon.

He’d never witnessed Lonnie’s abuse first hand but he’d heard the rumours from his deputies that Joyce Byers often showed up with weird excuses for her injuries. Putting two and two together hadn’t been hard and he’d kept an eye out for Joyce ever since moving back to town.

This was the first time though that the issue seemed to flare up. Or at least the first time someone had called him about it - maybe that was the difference. He didn’t know. All he knew was that Lonnie was still the same piece of garbage that he was when they were growing up.

“I swear I didn’t invite him over,” Joyce mutters, eventually breaking the silence between them. He glances at her from where he sits, his body hunched and his elbows on his knees as he looks her over. He hadn’t really asked how she was doing, figuring she would have spoken up if Lonnie’d hurt her, but now he was wondering if she would have even mentioned it for fear of upsetting him.

“Come here,” Hopper says quietly before reaching towards her. She slides down the couch and he pulls her into his lap until her head is tucked under his chin. “I didn’t think you did. Are you okay?”

“I didn’t know how to get rid of him. He just showed up and started yelling about you,” she pauses and he can feel her eyes on him. “I thought we’d been more careful, but I guess the word is out.”

“You didn’t answer my question though,” Hopper stills his hand where it’s drawing circles across her shoulder and leans back so he can meet her gaze with his. “Are you okay?”

For a brief second, he’s sure that she’s going to cry, his body ready to tear Lonnie to pieces. The tears well up and she sucks in a breath, her body taunt in his lap as he waits for her to confirm his suspicions. But then she blinks and the fear and anger he reads in her eyes dissipates as she exhales, slowly, markedly, before she tucks her head back into his chest.

“It’s nothing that sitting here with you like this can’t fix.”

Notes for the Chapter:

For those that have left a comment or note, thank you! I love getting feedback, constructive, hilarious, minimal feedback, all of it makes me feel warm and fuzzy inside <3

9. Chapter 9

He was due to report to the bus station for six in the morning but Hopper refused to think about it. It was Graduation Day in Hawkins and the town was alive for the students who had just finished high school, him among them.

They'd already suffered through the pomp and ceremony that had everyone in their black gowns, the excitement radiating off those whose next step was college. For kids like him though, the future wasn't as bright. His enlistment had come after another fight with his old man about what he was doing with his life - "Maybe I'll join the military!" He'd shouted, slamming his door and pulling out his smokes. His father had driven him to the recruitment centre himself the next day, waiting outside like a bad omen.

He was still pissed off about it, but he figured it was only time before they started the draft up again and his number was called. After thinking it through he'd rather be one of the first boots on the ground with the people who wanted to be there than with the bus load of fools who were forced to be there. Something about being surrounded by people who actually had your back made him think he had a better chance of getting out of there alive.

Whatever. Hopper didn't want to think about that axe hanging over his head. All he wanted to do was get drunk, get laid, and forget about this small town and all the people in it before he got blown off the face of the planet by some communist assholes.

"It would be just my luck," he mutters into the beer fridge at the corner store, pulling out a six-pack and heading for the till. The owner knows he's not of age but like usual he doesn't bat an eye at the fake ID Hopper produces and rings him up.

Stepping back onto the street, he allows himself a breath of fresh air before slipping a cigarette between his lips. He knows of a couple parties that were being thrown in their honour, the sparkling graduating class, but he didn't want to end up at the wrong one. The wrong one being the one where Joyce and Lonnie were going, to be exact.

If he was being honest, Joyce was the only person he wanted to spend his last night of freedom with. She'd been the one there through thick and thin, his second brain during study sessions and the one to hold the ice pack over his eye after another round with his father. But she had started seeing Lonnie mid-way through the winter after Hopper had pushed her away and they'd never really recovered from it. Now, every time he saw her she looked like a spooked rabbit ready to flee at any second. Something had changed in her - in him - and it seemed like the damage was irreparable.

A string of swear words at the ready, Hopper made the decision to head to Chrissy Carpenter's house on a whim. A small part of him was convinced that Joyce was still pissed off about that time he and Chrissy hooked up and that maybe she wouldn't want to spend her graduation in the same place as her. It was a small hope, but it was something, and that made the decision easier.

The evening flew by as the alcohol started flowing. Hopper made quick work of his six-pack and then moved onto the prepared punch, his body thrumming with the music and liquor as the small group of people danced and partied the night away. It was just after eleven when he found himself stumbling outside onto the porch as his hands distractedly searched his pockets for the pack of smokes. He was in desperate need, searching for that hit of nicotine to bring some clarity to his thoughts as he tried to light the smoke.

"Need a hand?" A small voice asked from the dark. He looked up and tried to squint to see them, but they were hidden in the shadows, tucked back near the line of trees.

"No - " He dropped the lighter and crouched down to pick it up, his large frame stumbling at the change in balance. "Fuck. Yes. Maybe." Hopper admitted wearily and let himself sink down to his butt. The world seemed much more stable down here and the stars - he sighed and laid back until he could take in the clear night sky above him.

"Here, take this one," she instructed, handing him a newly lit smoke as she took his from his lips. He grunted his appreciation as his eyes closed on the inhale. When he opened them he was surprised to see Joyce looming overhead, her tiny body standing and smoking his cigarette. She looked beautiful in her black dress with her hair pulled

back out of her face and he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen her look so good. Blinking once - twice - he tried to push the thoughts of her out of his head but couldn't do it.

"Are you going to sit down or let me look up your skirt all night?" Hopper asked after a moment, his smile wide as her shocked expression peered down at him. She dropped to her knees a second later and shook her head. "I thought you never wanted to see Chrissy ever again?" He jokes weakly, his fist coming to rest over his eyes.

"Yeah well, if it was up to me I'd be home in bed right now," she replies and taps the ash from the end of her smoke. Hopper was trained on her every moment, his pathetic gaze trying to drink her in while he could. This could be the last time he ever saw her and he didn't want to miss out on a thing.

"Oh yeah? Why's that?" He tries to keep the mood light, determined not to bring up their recent estrangement and how much he missed her these past months. But maybe she sees it in his eyes, or she can feel it emanating off of him, because when she looks down at him and their eyes meet her sadness is palpable.

"I think I'm pregnant, Hop," she whispers after a drawn out second, his inhale of smoke causing him to choke. Somehow he finds his way to his knees, the world spinning gently around him, as he rests his hands on her shoulders.

"Tell me that again," he asks and moves his head to meet her avoidant gaze.

"You heard me." The blood leaves his head in a rush, his eyes closing as he tries not to keel over from the shock, or the liquor. He's in no condition to deal with this information - too drunk and too emotional to process any of it properly. But when Joyce looks at him then he can practically feel the turbulence moving within her.

They sit there on the porch for what seems like hours, though he knows it's just time playing tricks on them. They don't speak much, except to confirm what they both know to be true - yes, it was Lonnie's. No, he didn't know.

“Are you going to keep it?” Hopper asks later, his arm wrapped around her shoulders as the night cools. Behind them the party seems to be dying down, the yelps of excitement coming fewer and farther in between. Beside him Joyce shrugs.

“I don’t know. I didn’t expect this to happen so quickly. I just wanted to get out of this town, to go to New York and be someone...” She pauses and closes her eyes, frustration and fear bleeding out of her.

“It’ll be okay,” Hopper sighs and pulls her against him.

He doesn’t know if it will - not really - but he’s willing to tell a white lie to believe it.

10. Chapter 10

Notes for the Chapter:

This was already posted over on Tumblr, but in case you missed it.... Also this is where it turns a bit more explicit, so yeah.

Hopper was drunk. Rip roaring, three sheets to the wind, stumbling around drunk.

It was supposed to be easy. That's what he'd told her time and again - it'll be quick in and out. He'd promised. But it wasn't. It never was for him.

Yesterday he'd taken El to the Doc Owens for a check-up after she'd started complaining about headaches. Owens had promised him personally that when they showed up he'd run some tests and then they'd leave, likely with a bill of clean health. But it hadn't gone that way and it had made Hopper a liar.

They'd arrived just after eight in the morning, trying to squeeze the appointment in before lunch. They hadn't realized that by Owens' standards, 'some tests' meant an entire day which eventually stretched into a night.

He didn't know why he didn't predict this would happen. He thought they'd come to an agreement - that El would be released from being a science experiment after she closed the gate the last time. That she'd be forgiven her past because she'd saved them all. But she wasn't - one step into the new laboratory space and she'd been ushered into a machine that operated in the dark and required her limbs to be strapped down.

Hopper had fought them from the start, demanding that he accompany her to every test and approve all of the procedures before they happened but somehow it still got away from him. They'd moved her from one machine to the next, her small body poked and prodded and drawn from until she didn't bother to fight anymore. He'd sat next to her bedside that afternoon and tried to rouse her but

she wouldn't budge from the fetal position she'd coiled herself into. She was blank, a shadow of herself, and he couldn't forgive himself for letting this happen.

"I've got to take her home," Hopper demanded as he stood outside the door to El's room. Somehow the day had dissolved into night and he refused to let her stay in their care without him.

"Chief, you know we need to find the source of these headaches. For a child like Jane - "

"She prefers El," He interrupts Owens and crosses his arms over his chest, determined to get his way.

"For a child like El then, you need to understand that her use of her powers comes at great personal cost. The bleeding that occurs after using her powers is a sign of brain trauma and we need to ensure that she is recovering appropriately from these traumas and not creating long-lasting damage. This is serious Chief and we need to treat it seriously." Owens shifts on his feet, his eyes darting away from Hopper and towards where El is curled on the bed.

"I get it, but I think you're forgetting that she's been tortured by men like you and the way this shit has happened today - without any of it being explained to her - is causing her more harm than a couple headaches. I wouldn't have brought her in if I didn't think it was serious, but I need your team to fucking listen or - "

"Okay. I hear you. I do. Stay the night for monitoring and then she can leave in the morning. We'll schedule a time for any follow-up tests when we know more. Fair?" Hopper rubs his eyes as he thinks it over, the burn of the fluorescent lighting giving him his own headache.

"Fine. One night. Figure out what's going on, Doc, or I swear to god - "

"Calm down, Pop. We've got this under control." He finishes with a pat to Hopper's arm before he turns on his heel and heads down the hall.

They'd stayed the night though sleep was hard to come by. When he did finally wake up, it was to El lashing out in her dreams beside him. Surprise had shot through him when he realized that sometime during the night she'd left the hospital bed and curled up next to him on the cot, her tiny body tucking in against his until her nightmare got the best of her. The emotions had come for his throat then and dragged him under, his hands coming to grip her arms as he tried to coax her back awake.

She refused to get back in the hospital bed alone and only agreed to leave the cot when Hopper crawled onto the stiff mattress and smoothed out the sheet next to him. They'd fallen back into a fitful sleep soothed by the lull of the machines and the sounds of the building around them.

The next morning, true to his word, Owens released El to head back to school. Hopper had offered to let her stay home and sleep off the miserable night but she'd been determined to not miss another day of class. He couldn't say the same for himself - after dropping El off at school Hopper beelined his way to his old haunt, desperate to drown the thoughts that were raging in his mind.

The bartender had greeted him with a tentative smile, offering a coffee since it was still early and even his regulars weren't yet sitting at the counter. Hopper asked for a double scotch and an open tab.

Now it was coming up on dinner time and he could barely stand, his body leaning heavily on the tavern's bar as the world spun around him. He couldn't stop thinking about Sara. About El. About the black hole that was consuming everything he had just when he thought he could be happy again.

"Chief, there's a call for you," the bartender calls out, the words wobbling as he tries to understand them.

"No - I'm not - no," he grumbles and wipes the water from his glass across his face. The bartender sets the phone on the wood in front of him and hands him the handset.

"Hop? What are you doing? El is here and she's worried," Joyce demands through the line, her voice frustrated. Hopper closes his

eyes and sighs, tears crashing over him like a wave. He must sob, must make some noise that gives him away, because the crowd around him hushes and Joyce's voice softens. "Jim... I'm coming to get you."

The line goes dead but Hopper keeps the handset in his grasp and pressed to his forehead until he can regain some of his composure.

"Chief, is everything, you know, okay?" The bartender asks, leaning in towards him and offering him a smoke. Hopper shakes his head and sits up tall, his face tightened up in a desperate smile.

"Everything is fine," he announces and tries to stand up from his barstool with a flourish. Making it halfway to the door, he stumbles over his own feet and has to grab at one of the nearby tables to steady himself.

"You forgot your hat and keys, Chief. Why don't you come sit down and wait for your ride?" The man comes around the bar and helps him into a chair, placing his hat on his head and sliding him a glass of water. Hopper takes the help, too drunk to do anything else, while he waits for Joyce to come and get him.

Practically falling through the doors, Joyce groans at the sight of him bent over the bar, his head in his arms. He's not sure how she does it but when he comes back around his face is pressed against the window of her car, the vibrations making his stomach turn.

"Joyce, pull over," he urges, his arm swinging at the mirror to signal her over. Squealing tires slide the car to the edge of the road where he opens the door and vomits along the side of the highway. The only thing that comes up is liquid and he's surprised - had he not eaten all day?

When they arrive at the cabin he's near ready to be sick again, thankful when he can roll himself out of her front seat and into the fresh air of the surrounding forest. He lays there for a moment before Joyce comes around to look down at him, sadness playing across her face.

"Come on, Hop, time to get you inside," she grunts and pulls at his

arm, steadying him as he gets to his feet. Though she's nearly half his size, she somehow manages to get him over the threshold and into his room before he collapses on his bed, the spinning taking over him again. He lay there prone as she removes his boots, her hands making quick work at stripping him down to his boxers. "I'm going to get these in the wash. Don't get up." She instructs before disappearing from the room.

When she comes back she finds him curled into his pillows, blanket half strewn over his waist as he breathes heavily. Setting the bucket down beside his bed she pulls the blanket up to tuck around him before placing a glass of water and aspirin on the table. She's almost through the bedroom door when he groans, his body shaking.

"Hop?" She whispers, concern lacing through her as she comes to crouch next to him.

"The black hole. It's going to take her too," he mumbles as he tries to contain the sobs that rake through him.

"Who, Hop? Nobody is going anywhere," Joyce soothes, pressing his hair back from his face.

"El. You. It's going to take everything and I won't make it. I can't do it again." Her chest constricts as he mumbles out his fears, the pain hidden beneath his words, radiating off of him with every breath. Joyce doesn't know how to help except to slide in behind him and wrap her arms around his torso, casts and all.

The next morning breaks through the window coverings in his room with a vengeance, the sun slicing through right into his eyes. His head throbs as though a marching band is preparing for the Rose Bowl, every sound echoing between his ears. Moving to sit up, the ground swoops dangerously before coming back to him and steadying itself. As he seizes on everything he has, he stumbles into the kitchen in his boxers and rubs his eyes trying to push the vision of Joyce in his t-shirt out of his mind.

"You're alive," she says quietly from the sink, his vision coming to life before him. Finding a chair, he falls into it and watches as she reaches up for a mug, the hemline of the shirt sliding up her thighs.

He's suddenly thankful for the table and all its non-see-through properties.

"It's only Wednesday, right?" He checks, concerned that he'd disappeared on his bender for more than a day. It wasn't the hangover that was making him feel bad, it was the guilt of abandoning El.

"Yes. Jonathan got the kids off school this morning, El included." She pulls out the chair across from him and slides him a piece of toast, frowning at him until he takes a bite out of it. Her frown turns into a measured gaze as she nibbles on her own piece, watching him. "I don't remember the last time I saw you that fucked up, Hop."

Wanting to look away, to hide from his embarrassment, he tucks his head and chews slowly. He doesn't want to talk or even think about it. He just wants to forget. The black hole just was - there was no explaining why it sucked in everything good in his life - just that it did.

"I talked to El last night and she said you guys were at the lab on Monday. What's going on?" Joyce prys gently, careful so as not to push him too far. She watches as he recoils, looking anywhere but at her. "I think I deserve to know after everything we've been through," she adds before pushing away her plate and leaning her forearms on the table.

He starts his sentence and stops, two, three, four times before he can get the words together. "El has been having these headaches. Boneshaker ones. So I took her to the lab to see if there was anything they could do and it was horrible. They kept her overnight and ran all these tests, I couldn't - Joyce," he stops, exhales, and then looks at her with tears in his eyes. "All I could see was Sara sitting in that bed. Like it was happening all over again."

This strong man who fought so hard to keep her family together was sitting here, falling apart in front of her and she could do nothing. There was no recourse to make this better, no way to magically fix El and ensure he didn't lose someone else he loved all over again. All she could do was go to him, to hold his aching head to her chest and try to keep it together herself as he wrapped her up in his arms.

Somewhere tucked inside all the hurt and pain emanating off of him was still the want for her, for the feel of her around him. Their shared loss mixed together and when her lips found his it was part comfort, part desire, that pulled her onto his lap with her legs straddling his.

Her fingers speared through his hair, pulling him to her until he broke away to drag his mouth along her collar. They got lost in each other, their hands running over exposed skin, the summer heat swirling around them as they pressed closer together. When his fingers slid between her legs the feel of it shocked through her, her body coming alive after so long with nothing and she ground her hips against his hand instinctively.

Hopper could feel her wetness through her underwear and it drove him forward, his fingers sliding under the thin cloth and against her folds. Her quick inhale was matched with his and her teeth sunk into his shoulder as he slid them into her.

“Fuck, Joyce, tell me this is okay,” he gasped into her hair, his hips rising to meet the press of her.

“Yes - just, we need a rubber,” she said between breaths, pulling back to meet his eyes with hers.

“I can’t - I mean, I’ve been safe. But Joyce, I can’t have kids - “ he admitted quietly, tentatively. He wasn’t sure when this was going to come up or even if it would have, but his fuzzy mind just blurted it out and there was no taking it back now. She stared at him incredulously for a moment, confusion apparent. “I got snipped after - After everything,” he admitted as his heart constricted in his chest.

“Oh,” she leaned down to kiss him then, her hand coming to his cheek as her body rocked against his. Closing his eyes, he let her consume his pain with every touch and every breath. “Yes. It’s okay then,” she murmured as her hand slipped down between them and pulled him free of his boxers.

His resulting hiss and her groan of appreciation pushed their memories away and all that remained was them and this moment. As his mouth slid along her neck, his teeth coming to nip at her ear, she slipped her fingers in next to his and pulled her own wetness out to

run along the length of him. He gasped at the feel of it and her laughter, quiet and sultry, turned the mood into something warmer that burned away the edging sadness and turned his need into something more urgent.

“I want you,” he groaned as she pulled aside her underwear and rubbed him through her juices. She moaned into his neck and moved to slide off his lap but he wouldn’t let her, his arm wrapping around her waist to hold her to him. “Where were you going?” He muttered in between whisper soft kisses across her chin.

“I want these off,” she hissed as she snapped the waistband of her underwear against her hip. Hopper’s answer was quick and decisive, his fingers tearing at the thin fabric until it gave way and he was able to slip it off her leg with ease.

“See, you didn’t have to leave me to get what you want,” he joked as he slipped a hand up her shirt to cup her breast.

She gasped at the contact and lifted up slightly to slide him inside her, her head resting against his shoulder as he swore under his breath. Neither of them moved for a moment, the feeling of them joined together for the first time causing them both to pause as their hearts beat out of their chests.

It was surreal, he thought to himself, as she lifted herself up and down against him. When he left for Vietnam he thought that would be the last time he’d ever see her, certain that it was their parting of ways. But fate had twisted them up and spit them out so that they found each other again and they were here, together, revelling in the feel of their bodies.

He wanted to take it slow, to enjoy every second of the feel of her, but his body was impatient and he was on fire for her. Without warning, he lifted them until she was perched on the edge of the table, her legs wrapping around his hips as he pushed into her deeper, always trying to gain more of her for himself. When he felt her body winding up for him he slid his free hand down to her clit, pressing and rubbing it until she was bucking against him, her arms tightening around his shoulders as she started to come undone around him.

The sight was spellbinding. He watched with a hand on the back of her neck as she curled into him, her lips finding purchase on his shoulder as she came. Her muscles clamping around him, her body urged him on until he was spilling into her, his body pressing into hers and trying to get closer, to crawl into her skin. The wave crashed over him until he could no longer stand, his body sliding back into the chair and pulling her with him, her head resting against his chest as he struggled to return his breathing to normal.

“I won’t leave you, Hop,” she murmured as their skin cooled, her arms wrapping around his hips. “Everything is going to be okay. The black hole isn’t going to take us. I promise.

Her words echoed within him, their phrasing making his heart squeeze as she enacted the rule of promises. He wanted to believe her, desperately, but he was afraid of being blindsided again. So he said nothing in response, instead choosing to press his lips to the crown of her head before leading them back to his bed.

11. Chapter 11

Notes for the Chapter:

A little bit of smut in here.

“Where are you taking me?” Joyce questions, leaning forward in the seat of Hopper’s truck as she scans the road around them. The sweltering heat of August was starting to ease off but her bangs still managed to form a sticky halo around her head even with the breeze blowing through the window.

They’ve just come from the mall after dropping the kids off to go back to school shopping. It was the first time they’d been totally alone all summer, not including the times they’d barricaded themselves into Joyce’s bedroom on one of their infrequent sleepovers, and Hopper was determined to make the most of it.

Taking the road a bit slower than usual, turning the radio up a bit louder, he leaned back and snuck a glance at the woman who’d made these last weeks somehow bearable. She’d been there for him at his lowest moment and had coaxed him back into the world of the living, impossibly being his rock when him and El had to go back to the lab for more tests after the school year ended. Somehow she’d held him together and more importantly, been there for El when things got too scary.

“Hop, you’re staring,” she chided, shifting towards him and jovially pushing his chin forward with her finger so he could watch where he was going. Nipping at her hand, he shot her a cat-got-the-canary look before returning his attention to the road. It didn’t stop him though from reaching his hand towards her and threading her fingers with his, her newly-uncasted hand offered willingly to him.

“Almost there,” he muttered in between song lyrics. Out of the corner of his eye he saw her sit up straighter, her hand flying to her lips as Lover’s Lake came into sight before them.

“What kind of a girl do you think I am, Jim Hopper?” She scolded jokingly, her expression screwed up in mock indignity.

"My best girl," he said slowly, pulling up to the edge of the forest. Shutting off the engine, he got out of the truck and pulled a basket and blanket from behind the seat, eyebrows lifted towards her. "El helped me pack it this morning. She said I needed to take you out somewhere nice so I figured you could relax, get some colour back into those limbs and... Yeah. I've never brought anyone out here," he sighed and shrugged his shoulders, watching her closely as she climbed out the passenger door.

Together they ambled down the path towards the water, the only sounds those of the forest in summertime accompanying them as they went. Reaching the shore line, Hopper tossed down the blanket and spread out along its edge with his boots kicked to the side. Joyce grinned and shook her head, pulling off her own shoes and rolling her jeans up to her knees.

"I'm going to get my feet wet, I've been dying to go swimming all summer," she laughed, a weight seemingly lifting from her shoulders and a lightness filling her.

"Oh yeah?" He grinned and jumped back to his feet with a quickness he didn't know he possessed. Stepping towards her, he lifted her chin so he could capture her lips as his fingers slid along her waistband. "Let's actually go swimming then. There's no one here - we can get away with it."

"But what would the police say if they caught us?" She teased and lifted her shirt over her head, his movements mirroring hers until they were both left only in their undergarments.

"I'm sure they'd tell you to put your weapon away." His eyes ghosted over her appreciatively as he said it.

"My weapon?"

"Have you looked at yourself in the mirror, Joyce?" He mumbled as he tucked his head to nibble on her shoulder.

"Yeah, and until recently I looked like I got hit by a Mack truck."

Shaking his head he let his beard scruff against her shoulder, his

hands pressing steadily into her waist. “Even then. You drive me crazy. Your body could kill me. Your brains could cut me to the quick. Your heart - “ He lifted her until she could wrap her legs around his waist, his body taking slow steps as he moved them towards the water. “ - It heals me. And I know, it’s really fucking cheesy to say it like that, but dammit, it’s true.”

The water coming up around them pricks their hot skin and Hopper drops until they’re mostly submerged, only their heads visible across the plane of the lake.

“It’s cold!” She squeals as he releases her, the heat of his body leaving hers as the water takes over.

“It’s not cold, you just need to toughen up.” He dunks his head and floats away a few feet, certain that if they’d stayed together any longer he’d jump ahead in his plan and take her right then. He didn’t want to do that - he wanted to treat her to a relaxing afternoon where her needs were met before his and if she wanted to swim, he was going to let her.

But she didn’t want to swim. At least not for longer than a few minutes because it was her who wrapped him up in her arms and her lips that found his with a fierceness he couldn’t deny. Making it to the shore she clung to him, her body pressing against his with every inch of her exposed skin. When he laid her back on the blanket, her white underwear see-through in the summer sun, his blood thumped heavily through his body.

“You’re a fucking sight, Joyce,” he whispered, sinking to his knees at her feet. She propped herself up on her elbows and watched as he lifted her freshly-healed ankle towards him. Lips pressed to skin, his fingers snaking along her calf, he dragged his mouth up to the crux of her knee and nipped at the skin there. Every slide of his damp beard mixed with the heat of his breath to leave her skin alive with goosebumps.

He tried to take his time, to savour the sound of her soft moans and the press of her thighs on his shoulders, but when he slipped her underwear from her hips and slid his tongue through her folds he knew he wouldn’t make it. He got lost in her, the feel and taste and

sound of her surrounding him. When he did finally make it to her lips she was half-spun and alive for him, her nails grating against his back as she used her feet to push his boxers past his knees.

Positioning him at her entrance, she caught his lips with hers and slowed the moment, her hands guiding the press of his hips with a control he admired. He sank into her with an exhale, like coming home after too long away. His body ached for release but he forced himself to hold on, hitching her leg up and pressing in deeper until he could rock himself against her center.

She moaned at the contact, her soul lighting up as he quickened his pace. It wasn't long before he started to lose his leverage, his thrusts growing uneven as she swore against his shoulder and bucked against him. The feeling rose like a fever as she came, her muscles clamping down on him as he moved within her. He slowed as she crumbled, his hips drawing out each movement as she turned to liquid around him.

"Hop," she moaned, her fingers sliding into his wet hair. He nuzzled into her neck, his body still hard and sliding languidly inside her. "Are you still - ?" He hums his response against her collar and shifts until he's resting on his side, her leg pulled over his hip so he can push back inside her.

"Is this - " He questions as she searches his gaze, looking for what he can't decide.

"Yes." Her slow nod, tentative, gives him all the permission he needs to cup his hand around her ass and increase the tempo of his hips into hers.

"Joyce," he groans as she presses closer, her gaze never leaving his as his hand slides to where they're connected, his fingertips urging her to come once more. When he feels her body tightening again he doesn't hold back, chasing her over the crest of the hill and emptying himself into her with a gasp and a shudder.

"Why did we waste so much time?" She asks a while later as their skin cools, her body half draped over his.

Hopper chuckles at the thought, understanding filling him. “We weren’t wasting time. We were distilling. Like a good scotch,” he assures her and traces shapes onto her exposed skin.

They tuck into their lunch as the sun peaks on the horizon, returning to the water eventually to rinse themselves off before redressing. Taking their time, they walk back to the truck hand in hand, their bodies never really straying too far from one another as though to do so would be too painful.

When they do make it into the truck Joyce makes the effort of sliding to the middle seat and lifting his arm around her shoulder, ignoring the summer heat and choosing instead the comfort of this man as they head back towards the mall.

12. Chapter 12

The first seizure strikes El mid-way through studying for an English test.

“Jim, it’s El,” Karen urges over the phone as he sits at his desk at the station. “Mike said she fell and started shaking. It was weird though - the whole house -”

“I’m coming to get her,” Hopper interjected, his heart stalling in his chest as he lurches to his feet.

“I’ve already called the ambulance and they’re on the way. We’ll go with her to the hospital and meet you there,” she says helpfully and Hopper swears into the phone.

The hospital wouldn’t know what to do with her, he knew that for sure. She was special and he suspected, from what Karen started to say, that when the seizure hit her her powers were activated uncontrollably.

His worst fears flooded back into him as he climbed into his truck and squealed his tires out of the parking lot. He made it to the hospital as the ambulance was pulling into the bay, jerking his truck to the side of the road and running to meet the paramedics as they opened the doors to the back.

“Chief, she’s freaking out on us. Won’t let us touch her - “

“Stop - hey, no, she’s afraid of hospitals,” Hopper shouts, pushing past the paramedic and crawling into the back of the ambulance before leaning over where El is strapped to the bed. “Shh, Ellie - hey,” he soothes, hands coming to her shoulders and squeezing gently until she stills in his grasp, panting heavily.

All at once her body collapses, her tears springing to her eyes and her sobs shaking through her tiny frame. “Where’s Mike? Is he okay?” She cries, twisting her arms as her powers pull the supplies from the shelf and onto the floor around him.

“Kid, I need you to calm down.” He makes quick work of the straps holding her down before he sets a hand on her chest and the other on her cheek. “Breathe with me, kid. It’s okay.”

“Chief, we need - “

“Shut up!” Hopper shouts, scowling at the paramedic who stands at the door. The man instinctively takes a step back, the blood draining from his face.

It takes a full minute of matched breathing with El’s hand held against his chest as he tries to calm her down. When she finally stills, her gaze clearing as she catches her breath, Hopper closes his eyes tightly and tries to run through what he knows.

“What happened?” He questions lowly as she moves to sit up.

“I don’t know. We were studying and then it was like everything froze and when I woke up Mike was shaking me and bleeding from his eye - I don’t know what I did!” She cries and tangles her fingers in her hair.

“Karen didn’t say anything about Mike so I’m sure - “ Hopper starts and growls as Mike shouts into the ambulance.

“El!” Hopper can hear Mike’s feet slapping against the ground as he sprints towards them and he turns just in time to see his panicked face. “El - oh my god.” The boy climbs onto the stretcher and wraps El up in his arms, no concern spared for anyone but her.

“Mike - Mike... Are you okay?” She hiccups against him, pulling back to run her hand over his brow. The blood there is smeared, a large band-aid plastered overtop of the cut as though it was rushed.

Hopper watches as the boy nods vigorously, pulling her back against him. “I’m okay. It’s just a cut. Are you okay? I was so scared, you just started flailing around on the floor and your pow - “

“How about we save the questions for later?” Hopper interrupts their reunion, his hand closing over Mike’s shoulder tightly. The boy pauses and swears under his breath as he looks back at the paramedics outside the ambulance doors. “I think we need to go in

there, get El checked out and I'll call Doc Owens."

"I can't go back there," El worries her lip between her teeth, her eyes wide with fear.

"I know you don't want to, but El, this isn't just a headache anymore." His heart breaks as he watches her expression crumble, her facade of strength disappearing before him.

"You have to see a doctor, El. I can stay with you, if you want, until it's over," Mike chimes in, his hand rubbing small circles on her back.

"Promise?" She counters, hesitant as she looks between Hopper and Mike. The two respond in unison, both ready to promise her the world.

13. Chapter 13

Fall used to be his favourite time of year. There was something about the cool crisp air and the changing of the leaves that made him comfortable in his own skin. At least until the year when Sara's symptoms first started. And then again when everything started happening with El and the Upside Down.

To say the season had changed for him was an understatement. Now it was an ominous shadow, lurking at the end of the summer and waiting with cold tendrils to pull him under and suffocate him. He didn't like to think about it - would rather keep his head down and try to make it to winter without paying attention. But this year there was no escaping it.

Pulling up to the Byer's house Hopper steals a glance towards El as she leans forward in her seat. On her lap is her costume, the ghost sheet she'd created last year finally being put to use for her first and likely only Halloween. It was supposed to be an exciting time but he couldn't shake the feeling that everyone was holding it together with tape and glue, the memory of last year hanging over them heavily.

"Kid, do you remember what the rules are for tonight?" He asked as he put the truck in park.

"Stay with the group. Say 'Trick or Treat' and 'Thank You'. Don't wander off alone. Be back by 9:30." She reeled it off with a bored tilt to her voice, likely because this was the nth time he was making her recite it. Hopper didn't care - he was stressed out about the whole thing and he just wanted these days to be over with.

"Good. Okay. Let's get this over with."

Lumbering towards the house, Hopper paused halfway up the driveway to settle his nerves as he looked up at the stars in the clear night sky. His breath puffed out of him in clouds of moisture, the chilly night promising a perfect atmosphere for a couple hours of trick-or-treating. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had to even think about this day, usually wasting it away in a bar or at his trailer away from the incessant knocking of children at his door. He was too

bitter to find solace in it like he once had, too hurt to find the happiness that it could bring.

“Chief, are you coming in?” Will calls from the door, breaking him from his thoughts and forcing him to finally head inside.

The atmosphere in the house is surprisingly tense, though the kids pretend like they don’t feel it. Hopper looks towards the living room where the gang is gearing up, their costume pieces strewn across the floor haphazardly. Joyce is tucked against the corner of the couch, a cigarette in hand as she watches them get ready. He doesn’t need to look hard to see the cracks in her facade, the whiteness of her knuckles. Apparently he wasn’t the only one trying to muscle through this anniversary.

“Are you guys ready to head out?” He breaks in, the group grabbing for the final pieces of their costumes. Glancing at Joyce he sees the camera tucked in her lap, the vacant look on her face as he realizes he’s going to need to be the one taking the sentimental lead here. Taking the camera from her, he makes them get together in a quick group shot before he kicks the kids out of the house leaving them surrounded by deafening silence.

“Thanks Hop,” she says after a moment, the cigarette burning to the filter as the ash drops on the carpet before her. He rubs his face and sits down on the couch with a huff, like he was dropping a weight from his chest with the movement.

“How are you holding up?” He asks lowly, looking between her and the movie that’s playing silently on the TV. He catches her shrug out of the corner of his eye and pulls his pack of smokes from his jeans pocket. Offering her another, she takes it quickly and accepts his lighter as though it were a respirator in the ocean. “That good eh?” He chuckles sadly and reaches his hand out to her, her fingers gripping around his across the cushion between them.

It’s another half hour before anyone knocks on the door, the quiet shattering like glass after being hit by a hammer. Hopper takes on the role of candy distributor, waiting at the entranceway for kids to cycle through the neighborhood and doling out the pieces in a generous fashion so as to hopefully run out quicker.

When he does get a chance to return to check on Joyce he's surprised to find her gone from the couch, her anxiousness having taken her to the kitchen where she's smoking another cigarette and leaning over the kitchen sink, the water running hot enough to cause steam to rise.

"Joyce," he calls from the doorway, the hair on the back of his neck standing on end. Hopper had expected tonight to be tense - it was a year since Will's symptoms appeared, the monsters coming back to Hawkins and the death of Bob - but her behaviour was starting to stress him out too, the distance between them almost tangible. "Joyce - " he tries again and steps into the room coming to stand behind her.

The doorbell rings with a pitch that brings his shoulders to his ears, his heavy footsteps moving to the door and dishing out candy with a forcefulness that makes the kids at the door take a step back. When he returns to the kitchen Joyce has left the sink running and is standing at the backdoor, the cold air blowing past her as she stands in her thin pajamas.

"Dammit Joyce, what's going on?" He growls as he burns his hand on the tap, the yelp escaping from him as he spins towards her. His hand falling on her shoulder makes her jump practically out of her skin, her tormented expression jolting through him like lightning as she turns to face him.

"Leave me alone, Hop," she whimpers before falling apart, the tears breaking from her eyes like a collapsing dam. Her body steps away and she disappears out the door, her small frame disappearing into the dark of her yard as he stands frozen in the kitchen.

It's the doorbell ringing that breaks him from his spell, his frustration rising as he moves to the front door to grab Joyce's coat and turns the porch light off with a slap. He double-times it back to the kitchen and steps into the yard, his gaze scanning the treeline as he looks for her.

"Joyce!" He shouts, anxiety prickling up his spine as the memories start flooding into his mind. He tries to push them away, to lock them down so that they don't drown him, but the fear he felt in the tunnels the year prior returns like a bucket of cold water and he has to fight not be paralyzed by it all.

The light in the shed draws his attention and he jogs towards it, whipping open the door and pulling up short as he sees Joyce tucked in the corner shivering. His instinct tells him to run to her, to drag her into his arms and take her inside but his experience screams at him to take it slow and not rush the situation for fear of things going awry.

“Hey,” he whispers and steps inside, closing the shed door behind him. The walls are still half-covered with the rags they’d put up last year to block out the walls, the remnants of the time they’d tied Will up in the space still dominating the atmosphere. “Joyce, what’s going on?” He tries before sitting down next to the door. She shakes her head and sobs, the sound thick in the small space.

Forcing himself to be patient, he waits her out determined to let her find her words as she exhausts herself with her tears. When finally she does catch her breath, her startled look towards him makes him swallow. “Tell me what to do,” he offers as he gets to his knees, pleading for a way to fix everything.

“I keep thinking about Bob and I feel like a traitor,” she whimpers lowly. His heart cracks in his chest, his fears of her rejecting him bubbling up to the surface as he watches her rise her shoulders in an exhausted shrug. “How could I just move on without him? Like he didn’t sacrifice himself for us?”

“You’re not a traitor,” he replies lamely as he shifts closer. Her resulting moan echoes around them and he pulls her into his arms, her body shaking as he holds her tightly. “It’s okay. Jesus Joyce, it’s okay,” he rambles on, desperate to de-escalate the situation as she cries into his shirt.

“I’m so sorry,” she hiccups as her arms squeeze around his neck.

“Don’t apologize. You have nothing to apologize for. These feelings are normal. He would want you to be happy - that’s all he wanted, remember? Bob just wanted to make you happy,” Hopper sighs as his hands make quick work of pulling the coat around her shoulders, his arm staying wrapped around her waist as he rises to his feet.

“Why does this keep happening to us?” He doesn’t know how to

answer her, his own black hole hanging in the back of his mind as he pulls her closer.

"I don't know. But we're going to be okay. Let's go inside and get you warmed up. We'll figure this out together," he whispers into her hair and starts to lead them through the yard and towards the light spilling from the open kitchen door. He doesn't bother to stop in the living room, leading her directly to her room and setting her down on the bed gently.

"I don't deserve you," Joyce says as she lays back, her body exhausted from the panic attack that she had likely been fighting for most of the day.

"Don't say that. You've done nothing wrong," he answers carefully as he pulls the blanket up over her shoulders. She stares at him through bloodshot eyes, her hand reaching out for his.

"Please don't leave me alone. I keep picturing it like I'm there all over again."

The horror of the scene in the lab floods his mind, the metallic smell overwhelming him like a flashback from his time in the war, vivid and bright. "I'm not going anywhere. Promise," he adds and slides down against her dresser, the scene from a year ago replaying over and over as he lets her cry it out.

Later, as her body finally starts to relax into the mattress, her small voice crackles out of her and causes him to drag his eyes up to meet hers. "Hopper, can you come up here?"

"Are you sure?" He counters, hesitant to spur on her feelings of guilt if he can help it. He knows the storm of emotions creating the turbulence within her too well, the ghosts of his own past haunting him.

"Yes," she answers quietly as he gets to his feet.

"The kids will be home soon," he reminds her as he lays down beside her above the comforter, his arm coming to rest over her hips.

"I know. I just need you here for a minute," she whispers and curls

against him, her lips coming to press slowly against his. When she pulls away her eyes are clear, her breathing steady. “You make me so happy it feels wrong sometimes, like I shouldn’t have found you so soon after Bob... But you were right. All he ever did was try to make me happy and it would be wrong to use him as an excuse to push you away because I was scared of us. I don’t know how to stop feeling like this, so please just... Don’t let me break us.”

He laughs lightly, his arms pulling her tiny form against his. “Joyce, I’m not going anywhere. We’re in this together, remember? I’m your first call, even if it’s just this shitty feeling you need help with - “

The sound of Will and El tumbling through the front door interrupts him and makes Joyce smile as her hand brushes the hair back from his face. Giddy sugar-driven laughter echoes down the hallway and Hopper pulls Joyce from under the covers, leading her back to the living room where the kids have dumped their bags of candy across the floor.

As they sit down to help sort, Hopper shares a look with Joyce that he hopes conveys just how much he loves this family they’ve created. When she smiles back, a slight nod and with tears at the corners of her eyes, he knows she feels it too.

Notes for the Chapter:

For all those who are with family right now and it's hard. I feel you.

14. Chapter 14

"I couldn't unlock the door today," El says from the couch in the cabin as Hopper walks in. He drops his utility belt on the table by the door and removes his hat, walking towards her.

"Sorry - what?" He pauses and looks between her and the TV, her eyes zeroed in on it.

"I had to crawl through the window after Mrs Wheeler dropped me off. Normally I can open the door without a problem," she repeats and glances up at him then looks away.

Rubbing a hand across his face, he sighs. "Where were your keys? I thought we talked about this. You're supposed to be cutting back on using your powers."

"I forgot them," she shrugs. He steps in front of the TV and squats down to her level, his eyes focused on her.

"El," he watches as her wide eyes blink and her composure crumbles. "Kid, it's okay," he whispers into her hair as he wraps her up in his arms.

Hopper tries not to be frustrated with her, she was just a kid, but she had to know how serious this situation was. Though her symptoms weren't getting worse - she hadn't had a seizure again since the first one - her headaches weren't really easing off. Doc Owens' tests returned nothing substantial - her brain scans were not showing any degradation which was a relief, but the mystery persisted and was starting to wear on them both.

"What do you say we call up the Byers and see if they want to go out to eat tonight?" Hopper asks when she finally pulls away, her momentary lapse in independence ending.

"Can we go to McDonalds?"

Phone in hand, he scrunches up his nose at the suggestion as he dials Joyce's number. She picks up on the third ring, breathless on the

other end of the phone. "Hello?"

"Joyce, bring Will and let's go out to dinner tonight. My treat," he offers knowing her bills are usually tighter than his.

"Oh, I don't know Hop," she groans and he can practically hear the stress in her voice.

"Mom!" Will yells from somewhere in the house, the sound cutting across the line.

"Shh, I'm on the phone!" She shouts back and Hopper chuckles at the reaction.

"We'll be there in twenty minutes," Hopper states and hangs up, unwilling to take no for an answer. El and him make quick work of getting ready and arrive sooner than expected to a dark house before them. "I just called them..." He mumbles, looking between Joyce's car and the empty windows.

Another second passes and Joyce and Will spill onto the front porch, Will struggling to put his coat on as Joyce drops her keys not once, but twice. He frowns at her flustered movements, watching carefully as they head towards the truck and pile in.

He knew the transition to not having Jonathan in the house would be tricky - Joyce relied on him heavily to keep Will looked after between her jobs - but he hadn't expected the situation to fall apart at the seams like it looked to be.

"Hey," El greeted as they clipped their seatbelts in and Joyce let out a heavy breath.

"Hi El - how're you doing?" Joyce replied, turning to face her and focusing in on her in the way that made Hopper's heart stumble with affection.

"I'm okay. I couldn't open the door today so he's trying to make me feel better."

Hopper starts the engine as Joyce looks towards him, her hand reaching across the seat to grip his tightly in solidarity. The comfort

comes unspoken between them and he manages to give her hand a squeeze before returning it to the wheel.

They're halfway to town when Hopper shoots Joyce a look, eyebrows raised. "Why were all the windows dark when we picked you up?" He asks lowly as Joyce's face flushes.

"She forgot to pay the electric bill," Will pipes up from the back, laughing at the situation. Joyce scowls at him and tries to shush him from her seat.

"Oh," Hopper nods, glancing at her briefly and gauging her reaction. "Was it a money thing or - "

"No. I just forgot. I went to the bank to wire the money for Jonathan's tuition but I forgot to pay the bill when I was there. It's fine," she stumbles over the words as though she's putting them together on the fly. He didn't need to be a detective to see through it, but he knew better than to question her on it.

"Got it. Do you guys want to stay at the cabin tonight until you can call them tomorrow? It's supposed to get cool..."

"Yes! Sleepover on a school night!" Will shouts from behind his seat as Joyce smiles weakly towards him.

"You're sure that's okay? I can bring the air mattress and set it up," she offers a strained smile as he pulls into a parking spot.

"You guys can share Hopper's room Mom, we know you share your room all the time when El stays over," Will interjects and Hopper watches as El punches his shoulder.

"You weren't supposed to tell them that we knew," she hisses towards her friend, their attempt at keeping the secret falling apart.

"Yeah but the air mattress sucks. It has holes and everything, El. She'd basically be sleeping on the floor!"

"Okay - got it. Let's just leave it at that," Hopper laughs awkwardly and makes a show of leading the way into the restaurant.

They settle down to eat and after El and Will disappear into the playplace leaving Joyce and Hopper alone at the table. Neither of them know really where to start with the conversations they need to have so instead they choose to sit quietly, Joyce coming over to lean next to him as they watch the kids beyond the glass.

The ride home is a loud one as the kid's excitement ramps up. Smiling, Hopper listens to the noise with a contentment he hadn't felt in a long time. When Sara died he'd thought that that was the end of family for him - he was on his own. He'd divorced Diane less than a year after her death, his drinking and self-medicating tearing apart the patchwork marriage they'd been struggling through for the last year. Moving back to Hawkins and taking on the Chief of Police position had been a measure of desperation and he'd disappeared into himself, drowning in alcohol and a spree of one-night stands.

He'd never imagined that the disappearance of Will would be a catalyst to changing so much of his life - it had brought him El, lead him back to Joyce and somehow helped him build a paper house that he was determined to make work for as long as he could. He didn't want to think about the end and what that would mean for him. He'd been telling Joyce the truth that day when he'd said he wouldn't survive it. He wouldn't. Couldn't.

But that wasn't a thought he wanted. Not as Joyce and Will piled into the truck with their overnight things and he drove back to the cabin in the dark. He got lost in the feel of the evening, the laughter coming easily as they forgot about everything that was going on. When Joyce and him were left on the couch as the hour grew late, he didn't care that the kids were in the other room as he pulled her to him, his lips settling on hers as he sighed against her.

"I thought we were hiding our tracks better," she murmurs after a moment, leaning back so she can look at him as her arms wrap around his neck.

"Mmhm, it was bound to happen eventually though."

"That's true. I don't know - I guess I just," she shrugs and tucks her head against his shoulder. "I think I just worry - they've been through a lot in the last few years. I don't want us not working - "

“Are you thinking we’re not going to work out?” He interrupts and pulls back, a chill running through him.

“No - not at all. I’m just...”

“Scared?” He offers when she pauses, her lip between her teeth.

“Yeah. That’s a good word for it. I feel like everything is going well for once, like I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop or something.” He closes his eyes and nods, his arms bringing her close again.

“God, I feel the same way. But I think half that fear is that you’ll just stop needing me and find someone else again,” he whispers the last part, self-conscious and vulnerable as he admits it.

“Again?” She presses, her fingers lightly scratching through his hair.

“It’s stupid.” His words are muttered, his lips placing kisses along her neckline as he tries to distract her.

“No, it’s not. Jim, when did I ever stop needing you?” She sits back and searches her eyes with his, fingers gripped in his shirt as though she couldn’t bare the thought of letting go.

“Like in highschool, with Lonnie,” he shrugs and looks away sheepishly. Joyce’s burst of laughter makes him jump in his skin, his eyes snapping back towards her.

“You told me that you couldn’t be with me,” she scoffs.

“I did not. I said that - “

“*“ I’m not right for you, Joyce ,”*” she tries to mimic his voice, her hands coming to her hips as she sits up tall on his lap. “It hurt me. I didn’t know how to deal with it and I made a mistake. But I never stopped needing you. That’s why I found you on Graduation Day and told you about the pregnancy. I needed your help then but - “

“I went off to war,” he adds quietly. They pause, their memories heavy on them until Hopper leans in and presses a whisper of a kiss to her lips. “We’ve found our way back,” he murmurs, his hand sliding up to cup her cheek. She returns the kiss, deepens it, before

drawing back and getting to her feet.

She leads them into his bedroom and they take their time undressing in the light of the bedside lamp. When they climb into the bed and pull the quilt up around them, Joyce makes an effort to tuck her back against his until they're flush and his hand is free to ghost over her skin.

They ensure to keep silent, their moans swallowed as their hands explore. It's only after Hopper slides out of her, his body spent, that she rolls over and slips her leg between his with her nose against his throat.

"Are you going to call Owens about El?" Joyce asks when their breathing returns to normal, the calm night around them quiet and still.

"Yeah. I'll do it tomorrow. I don't know though - I feel like maybe it's a good thing if her powers stop working. She can be a normal kid for once if it - I mean, is it shitty for me to feel like this?" He mumbles above her, his body instinctively tightening at the admission.

"No. I don't think it's bad to think that. It's been a challenge for her - for you both... Who knows what's going to happen."

"Right? I feel like we can handle it. Whatever happens. This is actually - Jesus - it's the first time I feel that way." He pauses and squeezes her to him. "Thank you."

"Mmm, don't say that now. Show me your thanks in the morning," she whispers and runs her hand down to his ass where she gives it a playful squeeze.

"Oh, don't worry - I fully intend to. Can I ask you something though and you won't get mad at me?" His voice is tentative and low and her response is a mumble that he takes as a yes. "Did you really forget to pay the bill, or were you out of money this month? It's just - I know the tuition to NYU is insane and as much as I love you here in my bed, I don't want -"

"Hop... We were having a nice time," she hisses and moves her head

until she can look up at him. He laughs and slides his hand into her hair, guiding her back against him.

“I know. I know. It’s just - I love you and that kid. I can help or we can figure something out that works - “ She pulls back from him then until she’s practically out from under the blanket, her elbow propping her up and exposing her breasts, the distraction immediate.

She stares at him until his gaze slides from her chest to her eyes, the tears that shimmer there making his heart stutter.

“Joyce - “ He starts, terror and confusion lacing through him. What had he said to cause this reaction? Reaching, he brushes his hand over her shoulder and up to her chin, pausing there as she leans into it.

“Hop.” Her whisper reverberates within him and he forces himself to keep his mouth shut. He felt like they were on the verge of something huge, the chasm between them one they needed to cross. “I - I mean... I love you too.”

The breath of relief shakes through him, a deep laugh rumbling through his chest as he pulls her towards him. “I thought I’d pissed you off,” he mutters and kisses her forehead.

“You do, regularly. But I’d never heard you say you loved me before,” she says and he can hear the smile in her voice.

“Well I do. I have. For quite some time,” he admits willingly. He couldn’t remember specifically when it happened, but it was somewhere between a shared cigarette at her kitchen table and watching her fall off that ladder.

“I don’t know if I stopped, to be honest,” she whispers in response as a yawn strikes her and has her curling in closer.

“Joyce...” His fingers lift her chin so he can capture her lips with his, a slow kiss that deepens as he becomes harder at her hip.

“We need to sleep,” she giggles as her hand wraps around him.

“I know. But we just said something huge. Shouldn’t we - you know -

seal the deal?” He asks lowly as his own hand finds her center and slips his fingers inside her.

“You’re definitely right. What was I thinking?” She sighs and surprises him by rolling him back and straddling him without warning. He takes the hint and changes his attention to her breast, teeth scraping across her nipples as she rises up and takes him inside.

The act is heated and quick. Their bodies working together, chasing each other with hands and lips, until Hopper has to lift a hand to her mouth to stifle her moan as she comes hard above him. When she collapses onto his chest he revels in the way her teeth nip at a sensitive spot on his neck, her heat squeezing around him until he can’t stand it anymore and he comes inside her with a heavy grunt.

Exhausted, content, they let their bodies cool until Hopper pulls the blanket over her shoulders.

“Hey Hop,” she whispers as her body moves to be his little spoon.

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

“Love you too.”

15. Chapter 15

He couldn't remember El ever smiling like she did sitting across from him at the Thanksgiving dinner table. She was in awe of the food, the glow of the candles making her face light up and her eyes twinkle as Joyce set down the last dish of brussel sprouts in front of her.

"Hop, do you want to say a toast?" Joyce asks as she finds her seat next to him and pulls up to the table.

There's only the four of them at the table this year - Jonathan still in New York and unable to afford the trip home despite Joyce's attempts at convincing him to come. While he was missed, their makeshift family was still determined to celebrate with all the pomp that makes Thanksgiving look so special on the TV shows so that El could have her first real American Thanksgiving.

"Uh, I mean, do I - " Hopper tries, looking between the faces and jerking upright when Joyce's foot connects with his shin. "Yes. Of course..." He clears his throat and takes a second to turn over his thoughts in his head.

The last time he'd given a speech at Thanksgiving was when he'd been at Diane's family event, Sara and Diane sitting at the head of the table and watching him with their own looks of adoration as he stood with a glass raised. The memory of it hit him like a brick and he had to bite his tongue to keep from falling apart.

Focusing on the people around him and holding the thoughts of those he'd lost in the forefront of his mind, he moved shakily to his feet.

"Thanksgiving hasn't been something I've looked forward to for a long time now. It's supposed to be about the pilgrims and the Native Americans or something, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't really all happiness and cornucopias like they want us to believe. Whatever, that's a different topic. Thanksgiving to me, I guess, is more about family - being with them and being thankful for them - and I haven't looked forward to it because when I think about it, I think of Sara," he pauses and Joyce takes the moment to thread her fingers through his. "But this year it's different. I've got El and Will... I've got you,

Joyce. And I've still got Sara here - " he taps his drink to his heart, gaze focused on the ceiling. "It's hard. But I'm thankful that I have you guys."

He sits down heavily, his hand coming to press the bridge of his nose as he looks at the floor. Joyce leans over and wraps her arm around his shoulders, her forehead pressed against his temple.

"I'm thankful for you, Dad," El whispers the word, her gaze locked on the man across from her. He hears it and his breathing stalls, his head slowly lifting to look at her.

"Dad?" He questions, the word sounding foreign to him coming from El. She offers him a tentative smile, her shoulders rising lightly.

"If that's okay?"

The recognition of the moment washes over him like a soothing balm for his wounds. She'd always called him Hopper, or Chief, or whatever she could think of in the moment, but she'd never called him Dad, not as a term of endearment anyways. It had been their agreement as they'd worked on this weird family they were trying to build - no Mama's, no Papa's, and we'll see what works from there. But she'd chosen this and it filled him with something he couldn't quite name.

"It's more than okay," he murmured and watched as her smile grew tenfold, the excitement practically visible as it poured off of her.

They dug into their feast in a festive mood, the conversation coming to them easily as the dishes on the table started to disappear. When it was over, Joyce and El worked to pack up the leftovers into two containers as Will and Hopper got started on the dishes. Making quick work of the clean-up, they settled in the living room to watch a movie but not before Hopper caught El up in a bone-crushing hug.

"Regardless of what you call me, kid, I think we're family - okay?" He whispers before pulling away.

"I know. It just sounds easier," she grins sheepishly and goes to join Will on the loveseat.

Hopper watches as she goes and can't wipe the smile off his face as he settles down on the couch. When Joyce lays across the cushions and settles her feet in his lap, her toes wiggling until he grabs them up in his hands, he can't help the feeling that maybe his black hole was letting him have this one.

16. Chapter 16

“We’re starting to be of the opinion that the changes El has been experiencing are tied with the hormonal changes of adolescence,” Owens explains as he sits behind his desk, El, Hopper and Joyce sitting awkwardly in the chairs across from him.

“So like, her growth spurts and stuff?” Hopper asks as he leans forward, expression tight.

“More like a nuanced version of premenstrual syndrome - “

“PMS?” Joyce scoffs, a nervous laugh escaping from her.

“Exactly. We did an analysis of the symptoms journal El’s been keeping for the past couple months and it lines up loosely with a 28 day pattern. It also works with the theory that this is happening because of a change in the body chemistry that comes with growing up - her peak presentation of her abilities was well documented by Dr Br - “

“Don’t,” Hopper interrupts and threatens, his hand finding his way to El’s shoulder where he squeezes it slightly in support. The mention of Dr Brenner was not something they did lightly - the man’s name often the cause of a recurrence of nightmares that were unpredictable.

“Apologies. As I was saying, her abilities were traced back to link directly with her developmental stages, so it would make sense that they would be changing again to correspond with her major hormonal shifts to adulthood,” Owens stops and looks towards El, leaning onto the desk and crossing his hands together. “Does this make sense to you?”

Both Hopper and Joyce turn towards her, all three of them waiting as she frowns. “Are my abilities going to go away?” She asks quietly, her face guarded.

“That we don’t know. It’s possible, but if I were to make an educated guess I would say that they won’t, but they may evolve, change and become something different over time.” El nods and closes her eyes

to take the information in. When she opens them again she has steeled herself once more.

“And what about the seizure?” Joyce questions as she slips her hand around El’s, the silent support speaking volumes.

“That’s the one piece that doesn’t really fit into the theory. If we go with this - and all signs say we should - then it could have been spurred on by high-stress or a moment of peak hormonal changes - “

“I was with Mike,” El interrupts and shrinks in her seat, her body trying to disappear into the chair.

“Yeah, but that shouldn’t - “ Hopper starts, looking between El and Owens.

“We were kissing,” she whispers and covers her face with her hands.

“Oh.” The admission makes Hopper pull up short, his spine straightening as he realizes that there was likely much more going on between the two of them than he’d realized. A thousand things flood his mind and internally he cringes, a cold sweat coating his skin as he tries to keep his mouth shut. Now was *not* the time to discuss this.

Maybe never, to be honest.

Looking across the desk, Hopper watches as Owens shuffles his papers uselessly. He turns and catches Joyce’s gaze, his eyebrows raised to his hairline as he tries to communicate without words.

“Okay then. Perhaps we know one of the reasons then,” Joyce murmurs, her hands clasped together in her lap. Hopper watches as she settles, her motherly instinct kicking in. Without a doubt he was thankful for her then - her experience with these conversations, with raising boys, and her playbook to these topics. He didn’t know what he’d do without her.

“Will we still be able to - “ El starts, sitting forward in her chair with a jolt as she realizes the opportunity to ask under the guise of surprise was quickly fading.

“El - “ Hopper hisses, biting his tongue and jerking to his feet. “I’ll be

outside.” He leaves the office with a burst of movement taking extra care not to let the door slam as he exits.

When El and Joyce step out after him a few minutes later, Hopper has his hat in his hands as he stands in the hallway. “Look - I’m sorry,” he mumbles, unable to meet either of their eyes. Joyce steps to him and gives him a quick hug before resting her hand on El’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry Hop, your girl is smart,” Joyce says with a smile, her expression beaming as she looks down at El. Hopper watches the interaction with his heart in his throat - not for the awkwardness of the conversation he’d avoided, but for the way his girls were building their own relationship of trust and reliance.

“Do I have to like, setup ground rules now?” Hopper groans later, his hands sliding across Joyce’s chest to her collar. Her inhale is quick against his neck as she laughs.

“You want to talk about this now?” Joyce whispers as her teeth nip at his ear, her hands working at his belt buckle.

“God no, I don’t know why - “ She stops his words with her mouth, her hands letting him springfree as he pushes the cups of her bra out of the way. The touch of her hand against his length makes the words disappear from his mind, his attention focused on only her and the heat of her capturing his attention as he strains up towards her.

They’d dropped El off at school before making their way towards the store where she was supposed to be starting her shift. Now they were parked in the alley behind the place, their breath having fogged up the windows as they pressed together. Instead of heading inside to work, they’d gotten distracted as he evolved the goodbye kiss into a makeout session which was quickly dissolving into a quick fuck in the front seat of his truck.

He regretted nothing.

Clothes pushed aside, mouths trailing over exposed skin, Hopper groans when he finally releases the zipper on her pants and slips his fingers between her folds. “When did you get so wet?” He sighs into

her mouth as he pushes his fingers inside her. She shivers at the contact and rolls her hips towards him instinctively.

“I wish I didn’t wear jeans today,” she moans in response and Hopper chuckles.

“We can work around them - “

“I just hate fucking in cars,” Joyce interrupts and shifts to get the steering wheel away from her ribs.

“Overly familiar with it?” He jokes and lets go of her as she turns. She kneels on the bench facing the passenger door, her hands struggling with shucking her pants as her arms are bound up in the mess of half-removed shirt and bra. Grunting in frustration, she collapses onto her stomach on the bench.

“Hop,” she whimpers as she twists her head over her shoulder to look at him. He grabs at her jeans and jerks them down until they’re past her thighs, her legs still half covered by them. Entranced by the look of her, he lets his hand slide over the curve of her ass before giving it a light slap. When she closes her eyes and groans at the contact, his body lurches forward and pulls her hips up until she’s leaning on her forearms, his chest pressed to her back.

“Is this okay?” He asks softly, pausing before leaning down to kiss her shoulder through her shirt. His body is on fire and while this was supposed to be quick and dirty, he couldn’t help but check to make sure she was ready.

“So okay,” she hisses as she pushes back into him, her heat drawing him closer.

Moving one hand to her hip and the other to his length, he slides into her with a groan, his body near jumping out of his skin as she envelopes him. She keens on the contact, her hips struggling to stay in place as he rocks into her again and again.

“Jesus, Joyce,” Hopper breathes as he slips a hand under her and against her clit. He can feel his release building and he’s determined to bring her with him but he can barely contain himself with the way

her body squeezes around him. "You're so fucking tight like this. It's killing me."

She laughs lightly as her body shivers. "Would you stop talking and just fuck me?" She mumbles and rests her head down on her hands with a moan. He shuts his mouth and takes the hint, pushing his cock in deeper with each thrust until she starts to cry out, her orgasm rolling through her body and taking him with her.

He tries to catch his breath on his hands and knees over top of her, tries to keep his body from collapsing and trapping her against the bench seat, but when she pulls his arm around her shoulder he loses the fight and falls beside her in a cramped mess of limbs.

"Sorry," she murmurs. "It's getting cold in here."

"You're right. And you're a bit late for work." Hopper smiles as she jolts upright, her hands struggling to right her clothing.

He tries to help but she slaps at him, her frustrated growl warning him off. "Where's that handkerchief you always have shoved between the seats?" She asks as she pushes him into a seated position while he tucks himself back in his pants.

"Why?" He frowns and watches as she sits on the edge of the seat, her pants still down at her knees.

"I need to wipe up!" She grumbles and digs her hand between the cushions. Hopper let's out a bark of laughter, his hands digging in his coat pocket until he pulls out the piece of cloth. She grabs for it but he pulls it back teasingly.

"Let me," he whispers as he leans in towards her, his lips at her ear as he slides the cloth between her legs slowly. Her resulting moan goes straight to his loins and he savours the smell of her hair, her shampoo with a hint of sweat mixed in, before he sits back.

She's slow to pull her pants back up, her gaze locked on his as he slides the cloth back into his pocket. When she leans into him, her lips hovering against his, he can practically feel the way her body thrums with want. The kiss she gives him is soft, light, and far too

short, he thinks as she slides out the passenger door. She's halfway into the rear door of the store when Hopper rolls down his window to watch her go.

"Will I see you tonight?" He calls out to her, half of him wanting to get out of the truck and drag her home for an afternoon alone.

"Yes. We should probably talk about those rules," she winks and let's the door slap shut behind her. His girls were going to be the end of him.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm procrastinating on packing, so here, have this smut.

17. Chapter 17

“What do you mean she didn’t show up to class? I dropped her off this morning,” Hopper grumbles, hand rubbing over his face as he listens to Flo on the radio.

“I don’t know, but when you’re done there you should give the school a call.”

“Fine, yeah. Thanks Flo.” Returning the radio handset to the dash a little bit harder than necessary, Hopper looks out the front of his truck windshield at the mess of vehicles and snow before him.

He’d been called out in the snowstorm to the scene of a crash, three cars had slid into one another and now the driver’s were fighting over who was responsible for the insurance claim. He didn’t want to deal with it - not really at all - he just wanted to go home and sit in the lights of Joyce’s Christmas tree...

Home. He’d done it again.

Whenever he thought of home now he thought of Joyce’s place and he wasn’t sure what to think of that. The cabin was nice and it was still where he and El lived, but both of them were starting to gravitate more towards the family atmosphere of the home that Joyce had built. There was something about the comfort of it all - the noise and excitement mixed with the quiet glances and the soft touches in the dead of night - that made him ache to be there more often.

He knew he wasn’t the only one feeling that way - on more than one occasion El had asked to stay over at the Byers’ instead of returning to the cabin to sleep. The funny thing was Hopper knew she wasn’t intent on staying there because of the food - Joyce’s cooking was nothing to write home about - but that she liked being around Will and likely moreso, being around Joyce.

They were both in over their heads when it came to loving Joyce and the realization had made him both giddy and nervous.

“Chief, they’re starting to throw punches,” Powell said through the

window, his knuckle tapping on the glass.

“Fuck,” he groaned and reached for the handle.

The response took over an hour to get sorted, the snow starting to drip down his neck as the slush soaked through his boots. Miserable and chilled, Hopper returned to the station and poured himself a cup of coffee before calling the school to follow up.

“Did she register for first period?” He was determined not to go off the deep end on this one. Kids skipped classes all the time - it was expected that she would do it eventually - but he thought she at least would have pretended to be sick or something to blow off school. “Okay. Thanks Theresa, Merry Christmas.” Hanging up the line, he leaned back in his desk chair and fiddled with the tab on his breast pocket.

She hadn’t gone to any of her classes today and nobody had seen her. The whole thing seemed unusual to him, she’d been looking forward to watching movies all day since it was the last day before the break. Hopper pulled out a smoke and tried to focus on the work on his desk, certain that she’d show up eventually after the failure of some half-baked plan with Max or something.

When six o’clock rolled around and she still hadn’t shown up at the cabin, Hopper started calling the families. The answers were all the same - yes, their kid was home, where was his? He tried not to take it personally but he could hear the judgement through the phone and it only frustrated him further.

While El was strongly independent, it was still unlike her to disappear like this. After closing the gate almost a year ago they’d found a common ground that meant better communication and more honesty, even in their arguments. It had been working for them and he couldn’t understand why she would just leave like this without warning.

His mind spun on all the possible things he’d said in the last week that could have caused her to run away like this. They’d disagreed on what to watch on TV, what to have for dinner, but nothing really had caused a strain that would explain why she’d left. Getting to his feet

he pulled a beer out of the fridge and sat down heavily at the kitchen table before staring at the can.

He was about to pop the tab when the phone rang.

“Hopper,” Joyce says into the line, her voice stressed. “Has she come home yet? You didn’t call.”

He pushes the beer away with the realization that if he started drinking now, he likely wouldn’t stop and that was not going to help him bring El home if he had to. “No, she’s not here yet. I don’t - Joyce, I have no idea what to do here.” He sighs into the line.

“Should we go look for her? Is that what we should do?” He thinks it over for a moment but then shakes his head as though she could see him.

“No. I mean, maybe after the snow lets up in the morning. But right now I think we just need to wait for her to come back. She’s resourceful and capable, I really just want to think she’s gotten the time mixed up or something,” he adds knowing full well that El has mastered understanding how time works by now. The situation doesn’t make any sense so he grasps at straws to keep his nerves about him.

“Have you called Owens? Maybe he knows - “

“I did. He hasn’t heard from her. This isn’t like her, at all.” Hopper can hear Joyce on the end of the phone picking at the wallpaper, her small frame likely tucked against the wall as she tries to keep it together.

“I know. Do you want us to come over? Keep you company?” She offers weakly.

Hopper pulls in a breath and sits up in the chair. He wanted to be with Joyce - she knew what this was like and he needed that right now. But he also wanted to be with her because she was likely reliving the worst period of her life too. “Yeah, I do. But the weather is looking pretty bad out there.”

“I’ll drive carefully. She’s safe, wherever she is Hop,” she adds,

knowing full well that he was thinking about her lost in the snow. He had to push the idea out of his mind - tomorrow was Christmas Eve and she would be here to open her presents on Christmas Day. She had to be.

The evening stretches on forever. It gets to the point, sometime around midnight, that Hopper stops answering the phone and lets Joyce take over. Putting on the record that El always liked to listen to, the sound drowning out the wind from the storm, Hopper sits heavily on the couch and stares at Will asleep against the armrest. It wasn't long ago that Will was missing, trapped in the Upside Down, and Joyce was in his position. He doesn't know how she managed to get through it - not as he sits here helplessly, hoping against everything that she was safe.

That she would come back.

"Why don't you go lay down?" Joyce says from above him, her arm sliding across his chest as she rests her chin on his head.

"She isn't home yet," he whispers and her arms tighten around his chest. "What if I drove her away?" The idea that the black hole got her had started to haunt him as the sun went down, his mind focusing on the worst case scenario. Now he was afraid to sleep, certain that if he did the visions of her dead in the snow would come to life and destroy him.

"You didn't," she assures him. She sounds so sure that he could almost believe her. Almost, but not really.

Rounding around the edge of the sofa, Joyce sets herself down in his lap and tucks into him. He tries keep it together as her fingers trace his cheekbones, her eyes searching his, but he can't and has to turn away so she won't see the fear inside of him. If she saw it, he wasn't sure he could stop himself from falling apart. Somewhere between this morning when the school first called and now his anger and frustration had dissolved into fear, blatant and suffocating, and he didn't know how to manage it.

The morning comes with an exhausted dullness as the storm outside subsides and the sun starts to creep out from behind the clouds. Will

is the first one to start making breakfast, his awareness of the state of his Mom and Hopper after a night of restless sleep driving him to sort through the fridge until he can find the eggs. Setting the scrambled egg on the table he encourages them to join him, pulling them to their feet and waving toast under their noses.

Halfway through the meal Hopper startles, his gaze whipping to the door as he watches the locks unclick of their own volition. A moment later and he's on his feet, his hands twisting at the handle and swinging the door open to reveal El standing on the porch, a package under her arm and bags under her eyes.

The shock of seeing her - in one piece and seemingly alright - makes his head go light and he drops to his knees before her. "You came back," he mumbles, his eyes searching hers.

"I didn't mean to be gone so long, but the snow... The bus I was taking stopped and we had to stay onboard all night. I couldn't call or do anything," she pauses and her demeanor changes, her strength disappears and all at once she's dropping the box and throwing herself into his arms, her small frame nearly knocking him over with the force of it.

"It's okay, kid," he whispers over and over against her hair, his hands holding her tightly to him. The tears he's been holding back for hours start to prick at the back of his eyes, escaping silently onto her shoulder as he pulls her closer.

"I'm sorry - I didn't mean to make you worried. I didn't want you to think something bad happened but I couldn't fix it and I didn't know what to do," she sobs against him.

"I know. It's okay," he tries to calm her, his hands rubbing circles against her back.

"El, why didn't you tell us where you were going?" Will asks from the table, his words breaking into their reunion bubble. Hopper lets her pull back and notice the other two people in the cabin, their bodies frozen in their seats.

"It was supposed to be a surprise," she watches Joyce and Will with

trepidation, uncertainty flooding her at their reaction. Hopper moves to get back to his feet, ushering El inside as he finally closes the door. The silence in the cabin drags out and he can practically feel the barrage of questions waiting to be asked.

“But you didn’t even tell Mike. You tell him everything!” Will added, getting to his feet and stepping closer to her.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, her shoulders sinking lower as she starts to disappear into her coat. She couldn’t meet his stare, the intensity between them building as Joyce stepped to Hopper’s side curiously.

“Everyone was worried El,” he says quietly and reaches out to her, his arms pulling her in for a hug. She stands stock still, her body unmoving for a moment before she relaxes into his embrace and returns the hug with surprising force. “Next time just tell us where you’re going so we don’t worry. Okay?” He asks as he pulls away and looks towards Hopper and Joyce with a small smile on his face.

“He’s right,” Joyce adds, nodding. El steps towards her and wraps her in a tight hug, the unexpected force catching her off guard.

“I’m sorry guys. I was supposed to be back before school was over. I just wanted to get a good present and I had to go to the city to get it,” El says when she finally pulls away, stepping back to the box and picking it up. She presses it towards Hopper’s hands, her face looking up to him hopefully. “Merry Christmas, Dad,” she adds quietly as he takes it.

“Ellie, having you home safe is the best gift you can give me for Christmas,” Hopper sighs as he takes the box under one arm and pulls her back into his arm for another crushing hug.

Notes for the Chapter:

I think the updates will slow/stop for this story around 21 as I've started working on an actual WIP that is taking all of my brain power. But, hopefully you get to enjoy these next few updates all the same!

18. Chapter 18

Notes for the Chapter:

And, we're caught up to New Years! Hurray! If you want, come find me on Tumblr at lollercakesff

“Is this what I think it is?” Will’s voice carries into the bathroom where Hopper is leaning over the sink, his head spinning as he brushes his teeth. The hangover was aching through him and making his vision blurry, the night’s events coming to him in a haze of wine and cigarettes.

Last night Joyce had forced him to attend the Wheeler’s New Year’s Eve party, an ‘adults only’ event that he’d had to don his best suit jacket for. It hadn’t been that bad, if he was being honest. He’d spent the majority of the time picturing how he was going to get Joyce out of her new dress, cornering her at every opportunity and pressing himself against her until she pushed him away with a heated smile on her lips.

Somehow they’d gotten back to Joyce’s after the kids had all crashed, their own party chaperoned by Jonathan and Nancy who had fallen asleep curled up on the couch. They’d tried to be quiet but their haphazard stumbling through the door had woken both of them up and Jonathan had been less than helpful as he steered them towards Joyce’s room with a scornful voice.

He barely remembered any of it as he breathed through the echo of Will and Jonathan outside the bathroom door.

“Where did you get that?” Jonathan hisses in return.

“I found it near the boots when Mike was leaving. Is it yours?” Will’s voice carries clearly through the walls and Hopper wishes he were still in bed, unconscious.

“No, of course not. You really think I would get an engagement ring for Nancy? We’ve only been together for like a minute...” The voice trails off and Hopper stands up straight, his eyes widening as he turns

towards the door. If he had any colour in his face to start with, it was gone the moment he realized they'd found his ring.

"Shit," he growled, his hand whipping open the door and startling the two boys. In an instant he realized this was probably not the best plan of action, his body swaying as he looked between them.

"Chief," Jonathan grinned broadly, the secret obvious to him in that moment. Hopper looked from him to a stunned Will, the younger boy's hand outstretched towards him with the small velvet box in his palm. Hopper took it gingerly and held out a finger, his eyes closing as he moved it between them.

"Please," he groaned and leaned against the doorframe. He shouldn't have had that last glass of merlot - wine always killed him. "Don't tell your - "

"Tell me what?" Joyce interjected, opening the door to her room still wrapped in her dress from the night before, her hair a mess around her face. He must have failed at all the plans he had to get her out of her dress, he realized with a frown.

The distraction of her was enough to make him forget about the box in his hand and the missed second gave Joyce the chance to see it, her eyes widening as she looked between the three of them.

"Busted," El called from the other end of the hallway, her head sticking out of the door to Will's room. Hopper's groan was defeated and he turned to lean more heavily against the doorframe, his forehead pressed against the cool wood to try to steady himself.

He'd been carrying around this damn ring for almost a month now, constantly planning situations that just never seemed like the perfect time. Time and again he'd watched the moment pass, gotten too drawn into being with her that he couldn't make himself potentially ruin it if she said no.

He was terrified she would say no. It had barely been a year since Bob died and he knew he was all in, but he could never be sure she was until he got up the courage to ask her. So he'd delayed and procrastinated and dammit, now he was standing in the hallway with

the mother of all hangovers and everyone watching as she realized he was ready to propose. It was a mess.

“Chief, you don’t look so good,” Jonathan breaks into his thoughts, his hand coming to rest on Hopper’s shoulder. The act seems to be the one that breaks the camel’s back and Hopper spins onto his knees, his body retching into the toilet the hors d’oeuvres from the night before.

This could not get any worse , he thinks to himself as the blood rises in his cheeks from a mixture of embarrassment and illness. He leans against his arms, the ring falling from his grip and into the bowl with an almost comical slowness as he swears under his breath. He watches it bob there for a moment, defeated, before Joyce’s painted fingernails reach over his shoulder and grab it unflinchingly.

“Please don’t,” he whimpers pathetically as she lifts the small box. He can’t get the courage to meet her gaze, his fears clouding in on him with the realization that there was no way she’d say yes now, not when he couldn’t even get up the courage to ask her.

“Hop,” she murmurs after a brief moment of running the box under the tap. Her body comes to rest against his, her tiny groan telling him of her own impossible hangover.

“I’m sorry. It wasn’t supposed to - “ He starts and her hand runs through his hair distractingly, pulling him up short as he turns to finally look at her. Taking in her pale skin and the way the makeup runs around her eyes he nearly laughs, the vision of her hangover mirroring his almost too fitting.

“Whenever you do get it together to ask, it’ll be a yes,” she says after a moment, her eyes closed likely to stop the world from spinning around her. His heart jolts in his chest, his hand coming up to awkwardly brush against her cheek until she squints at him, a small smile playing at her lips.

“I want to kiss you right now,” he smiles, a laugh choking out of him as she scrunches her nose at the suggestion. Despite the fact that he’s leaning against a toilet and that his mouth is in desperate need of another brushing, she still leans in towards him so she can press a

kiss to his forehead, the effort slow and speaking volumes.

When she pulls away it's only because there's a knock at the bathroom door, a hesitant voice outside. "Did she say yes?" El asks quietly into the wood, causing Hopper to grin sheepishly.

"Not yet, but she will."

19. Chapter 19

“These appointments are stupid,” El groans as she drags her feet back to the truck. Hopper couldn’t begrudge her the complaint - she’s the one who had just endured three hours of tests that took her in and out of machines to get her quarterly check-ups.

Now that Owens had an idea of what could be happening they were tracking her progress to monitor her health and try to catch any declines before they happened. They hoped with this new proactive approach they could help her overcome the challenges before they became too big to roll back. Hopper wanted to believe that they were doing it out of concern for her, but he couldn’t fully rule out the idea that they were keeping tabs on her for their own gain. He didn’t think he’d ever get rid of that suspicious feeling, at least not when it came to protecting El.

“I know, kid,” he grumbles as he steps into the driver’s seat and turns the heat to full blast. Peeling out of the parking lot, he heads towards the school as his mind returns to the files that are waiting on his desk. The store robbery from earlier in the week was particularly problematic for him, the regular suspects all having cleared the initial alibi check that his deputies had performed.

“Dad!” El screams abruptly, forcing his attention back to the road before him and the way the truck seems to freeze in time, Hopper’s body crashing against the steering wheel as El bounces in her seatbelt.

“What the hell - “ he stops mid-sentence as he looks out the front window, a mangy looking dog standing in the middle of the road and staring at them. “You’ve got to be kidding me - El!” He shouts after her as she clambers out of the truck, her feet slipping on the thin layer of snow as the blood from her nose leaks down her lip. “Stop! El - he could be dangerous - shit, El!”

Nothing he says makes her stop her efforts to get to the dog, her small hand reaching out to him tentatively as he stops at the front of the truck. The dog cowers before approaching her slowly, his nose sniffing the tips of her fingers.

"Hop, you almost hit him!" She calls back, her expression softening as she runs a hand over the dog's fur. "What's your name?"

"El, get back in the truck, you've got to go to class," Hopper sighs, realizing that he is definitely going to lose this battle as the two of them bond before his eyes.

"Can we keep him?" Her expression is guarded, her eyes wide as she looks towards him.

"Are you kidding me right now?" Hopper cocks his head to the side as he looks at her. They were standing in the middle of the road, snow lightly falling as she clung to a stray dog, her heart on her sleeve.

"Please? He has nowhere else to go and it's cold out!" His heart thumps heavily and he looks between her and the dog, trying to think of a reason he could say no without breaking her heart.

"This is a maybe yes. We'll take it home, call and see if anyone has reported a lost dog. Okay?" He knows he'll likely regret this, but he can't say no to her. "Bring it to the truck. You still have to go to school though. And next time don't use your abilities to stop us, that hurt," he adds as a hand absently rubs his ribs while they climb inside.

"You should be wearing a seatbelt," she counters as the dog lays down at her feet, a familiarity with people that shouts that he has owners to take care of him.

"I know, I know." As he says it she stares at him, her gaze unflinching until he reaches for the buckle and she smiles in return.

They're mid-way to the school when he realizes that this is the first time she's approached something unfamiliar with such confidence, her usual tentative observation so far from her reaction that it was like she was another kid. He tucks the realization away to ask her later, hoping she got the idea from something other than reruns of The Littlest Hobo on TV.

"I think I want to call him 'Woof'," she says as they pull into the

school parking lot, her hand reaching behind the seat to grab her backpack.

“You can’t name a pet after a sound, El,” he counters.

“Isn’t that what you do with them? Dustin’s cat is named Mews...” She frowns and looks down at the dog and then back to Hopper.

Trying to hold in the laughter, he ruffles her hair in his hand and leans down to let the dog sniff at him. “Dustin’s cat is not a normal cat. Think of something else to call him for now.”

“Okay. Bye Dog!” She adds and jumps from the truck, looking up at him with a smile plastered against her face, her eyes bright and excited like the first time he played music for her. The look melts him and he has to shake his head, rolling down the window and sticking his head out to call after her.

“I haven’t said we’re keeping it yet!” He shouts as she turns to look back.

“You will. You like taking in strays!” She returns and disappears through the doors.

He should have seen that coming. Of course she was drawn to this dog - it was basically her a year ago when she finally appeared out of the forest, scared and frozen as he let her follow him into his truck and into his life.

“Shit,” he groaned and looked down at the dog who stared up at him. “I was just getting used to having her around. You better be house trained.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I started a new job today. In a new city. I spent the day doing online training and I've spent the evening listening to this fool in my airBNB stomping around like a fucking goon. Ugh. Come distract me if you want - lollercakesff on Tumblr.

20. Chapter 20

“Can we please just go inside? I’m freezing,” Hopper complains, his frustration level creeping up with every second that the temperature in the car cools in the February air.

“I don’t even know why you brought me here Hop. I told you I didn’t want to move,” Joyce huffs and a cloud of moisture floats away from her lips. Hopper rolls his eyes at the way she crosses her arms over her chest, the move so like El that he wonders who had learned it from whom.

“It doesn’t mean we have to move. It means that we can go in, check out the house and see if it’s somewhere we could start fresh,” he grumbles, the idea one he has repeated more than once in this debate.

It had only been a few weeks since Hopper and El had moved into the Byers home, El taking over Jonathan’s room after he declared he was planning to find an apartment in the city for the summer. The announcement had been like the start of a waterfall, the decisions of change coming quickly as things started falling into place.

To say the transition had been interesting would be an understatement, the kids already struggling with sharing the single bathroom between everyone. They hadn’t really thought about the chafing that would happen when the move became final, all of their belongings somehow needing to find their own space in the house that had barely fit three people before. Now with the four of them plus Dog living in the small house it seemed like there was nowhere to hide and they were faced with each other all the time.

Hopper knew it was growing pains. It was bound to happen. But still. He hated the idea that they were struggling to live in a house that held so many bad memories when he could sell off the trailer and the land and put a downpayment on a house that actually fit them.

He’d even been searching for weeks for the perfect one, a two-storey build on the edge of town, secluded enough to keep them comfortable but close enough to school and work that they didn’t

need to stress about the distance. It hadn't been easy getting Joyce out to see it, but now that they were here he couldn't stop worrying about her growing resistance and her history of stubbornness.

"Ugh! Fine. But I'm only agreeing to it because it's Mary Palmer and she will literally tell the entire town that I'm pissed off at you if we don't go in there," she hisses and jerks at the door handle.

Hopper follows her out with a false smile plastered on his face, her steps moving fast enough that he had to double time to keep up with her.

"Chief! Joyce! I haven't seen you in forever, how *are* you?" Mary called from the front door, her clipboard in her arms.

"We're fine. Thanks." Joyce snaps and follows her inside. The minute they're through the door, Joyce stops up short and Hopper slams into her, his large frame forcing her to pitch forward until he wraps an arm around her waist. "Dammit Hop!" She scolds and rights herself, her cheeks flushed in embarrassment.

"Sorry, I didn't think they had speed bumps in entranceways," he whispers and tucks his hands in his pockets, his attention distracted by the openness of the house before him. Instinctively the place relaxes him, the wood floors and the earth tones so unusual in houses this decade that he feels like he's in the forest and naturally at ease. Stealing a glance towards Joyce he swallows his words, her face alight as she looks at the space around her.

"Well, let me tell you a bit about the house as we go. This is the main level and has the kitchen, living room and a small dining area. The kitchen is fully outfitted with new appliances and opens into a large backyard - "

"That would be great for Dog," Hopper whispers and dodges past them to look through the kitchen's wide windows.

"Oh, you have a dog? Wonderful! Why don't we head upstairs to take a look at the bedrooms?" She adds before leading them through the bright living room and to the staircase. Joyce follows without saying a thing, her face an unreadable mask as she looks around her. "Like I

explained earlier Chief, the house has three bedrooms though the basement could easily be transformed into a fourth. The two rooms on the street-facing side of the house are perfect for children's rooms or to be used as a guest room and study."

They move room to room, poking their heads through the doorways and into closets as they go. Hopper can't keep the smile off his face as Mary points out the bathroom at the end of the hall, one that would be just for the kids. When he steals another glance at Joyce she rolls her eyes and heads towards the last door on the floor, the entrance to the master bedroom.

"And this - " Mary steps ahead of her to swing open the door, her grand reveal pulling them up short as they step inside. "Is the master suite. As you can see it has these phenomenal bay windows that overlook the lake out back while also letting in all this gorgeous natural light. In the corner over here we have a three-piece ensuite bathroom - "

Hopper doesn't really hear the rest of Mary's spiel, his feet dragging him towards the windows where Joyce is staring into the trees that line around the yard and break into the water. Despite the earlier tension, the look he sees on her face is the most emotion he's seen from her all day and it makes him doubt whether this was a good idea or not.

"Joyce," he sighs as his arm comes around her shoulders. When she doesn't shrug him off he turns to Mary and smiles tightly. "Could you give us a second?" Nodding, Mary disappears from the room, her heels clicking as she heads back downstairs. "What's going through your head right now?" He prods, rubbing her arm.

She smiles slightly and shrugs, her exhale audible as she lifts her hands before her. "This house is beautiful," she admits with a tense laugh.

"I feel like there's a 'but' coming..." Hopper pushes as he turns to her, his face hopeful.

"I just - Hop... I can see us here. It terrifies me - I've lived in my house since I moved out of my parents house. It's the only home

Jonathan and Will have known... But I can see the kids in those rooms and I don't know if we can even afford this, and that just - " She steps away from him and chews on a finger, her stress tangible as it radiates off of her.

Hopper can only smile, stepping towards her and running his hands up her arms. When she doesn't shy away he slides them to bracket her face and leans towards her, his lips hovering above hers. "We can do this," he whispers before giving her a light kiss. Her breath mingles with his, the mint from her gum floating up to him as he meets her gaze. "If you want this, we can make this happen. I've got land from my parents, the trailer, our salaries..." He slides his lips up to her forehead, another kiss landing across her brow. "Tell me you want this Joyce and it's yours."

Her pause stretches out for what seems like forever, her fingers bunching up his shirt in anxious bouts. "I - " she starts and looks around them, her eyes filling with unshed tears. "I want this Hop."

Hearing the words he grabs her up in his arms with a jolt, his lips finding hers in a seeking kiss that knocks their teeth together in their excitement. "We're going to make this work. Jesus, I love you. Thank you for trusting me."

"I trust *us* ," she counters as he sets her back on her feet, her hands coming to tuck her hair away from her eyes. She takes a moment to look at the room around her, fingers on her cheeks as though she can't believe what they've just agreed too.

Though they know the house isn't a done deal, Mary is frank with the fact that not many people are looking for property on the edge of town and that that works in their favour. They leave the viewing with an offer on the table, their hearts beating out of their chests as they slide into the front of the truck.

"Did we just do that?" Joyce breathes as he starts up the engine and looks towards her. She rubs her hands together and sticks them between her legs before he chuckles and leans over to bring her hands to the heat fans.

"I think we did. Wanna go celebrate?" Hopper offers and pulls onto

the road, his attention half focused on her.

“God yes,” she laughs and leans up to nip at his ear.

Stumbling through the cabin door together, they realize the downside of their plan when they remove their coats, the cold air slapping at them as their hands cling to one another.

“Jesus, Hop,” Joyce groans as his cold fingers snake beneath her shirt and over her ribs.

“I know,” he mumbles and pulls her tighter to him, the heat from his body pouring off of him. “Give me five minutes and you’ll be warmer, promise.” The words escape from him as he turns her around and presses her hands onto the counter, his chest against her back. “Stay like this,” he sighs against her ear and she hisses as his beard drags against her neck.

Hopper works his hands across the front of her, sliding under her shirt and spreading heat wherever they travel. When his fingers pass over her nipples they peak under his touch through the thin cotton bra that covers them and his quiet chuckle at her body’s reactions spurs her to lean her head back against his shoulder, her body leaning against him as his hips trap her against the counter. The heat between her legs pools as she feels him harden against her ass, his hot breaths drifting over her while her body warms.

When his hands finally ghost over her thighs he’s crouched behind her, his fingers making quick work of the fastenings of her pants before he pulls them down and stands back up to envelope her in his warmth once again.

“Okay?” He asks as his right hand releases his belt, his left coming to cup her breast under her shirt through her bra. Her returning nod, quick and determined, has him pressing a kiss to her forehead before he lets himself spring free from his pants, the fabric slipping down his legs.

He slides into her slowly, the movement steady as he feels like he’s coming home into her skin. Though his body is fighting to make this quick, pleading with him to rush through it, he leans into her and

nips at her shoulder as his hands cover hers.

“Hop,” she keens as he rocks into her heat, his length spearing her with each thrust. The empty cabin around them creaks in the wind from outside, their sounds bouncing off the walls as he picks up the pace. Their clothing catches with each push, their barely exposed skin sparking with every touch of cool air. “Don’t stop,” she whispers as she pulls her hand from the counter and runs it down to where they’d joined, her fingers starting to work at her clit with a feverish pace.

His brain shorts out at her efforts, the picture of her working herself off making him lose control and rut into her with a force that is likely to leave bruises on her hips from the laminate. She doesn’t seem to mind the pain though as his arm wraps around her collar and pulls her flush against him, his panting breaths making the wisps of her hair swirl about her face.

“Fuck Joyce,” he grunts into her ear, his whole body pushing into her and making her toes curl as she screams out. If there were birds in the trees they’d surely take flight as the two of them come undone, Hopper’s torso collapsing onto hers until she’s bent over the counter, her head resting where the toaster used to sit.

They stay there like that until they can breathe again, his length sliding out of her as he shifts to run kisses from her hairline to her shoulder. She moans at the contact, her eyes flying up to his and matching the dreamy smile that covers his face.

“Why didn’t we ever do this when we were younger? I mean - if it’s this good now, Jesus, we could have set buildings on fire.” His voice is gravely, a combination of cold air and too many cigarettes, and it weaves around her like a fog as she rests her head on her hands. Eventually he steps away and the loss of his heat at her back makes her shiver until he returns with a tissue to help her clean up.

“Hmm, I don’t know, I think we definitely picked up some tricks that we wouldn’t have had back in the day,” she replies and groans as his fingers slide her underwear back over her hips. If she were being honest, she’d never had someone take care of her after sex - never really had someone take care of her during either - and she felt

spoiled by the attention he gave her, the tender touches and the soft kisses after the act speaking more than the act itself. She felt revered by him and it made her want him even more.

“True. But I think we could have figured out some real groundbreaking stuff. Published books about it and everything,” he joked before moving to put the tissue in the wood stove. “Do you want to hang out here for a bit? The kids will probably be playing that game for another few hours, I could put on a fire...?”

She turns from where she’s reaching for her coat, his hopeful face peeking up at her from where he’s crouched next to the stove with his flannel sleeves rolled up. Joyce can’t resist him and nods, her hands pulling her coat around her shoulders.

“I’ll try to find a blanket or something,” she says and moves awkwardly around the empty space. It looks so different now, she realizes, noticing the absence of El and Will’s drawings plastering the walls and the knick knacks Hopper had put back into storage when they moved. He’d dismantled his home to try to fit into hers. Hell, he’d transformed his life to fit hers and El’s... “I’m sorry I was so hard on you earlier. I guess I didn’t think about the fact that you’ve given up so much for us these past few years,” she says, her arms full of a quilt she finds in the closet.

He looks up at her from where he kneels, his steady hands placing the wood into the stove. “You weren’t hard on me Joyce. You were protecting your family and that includes the place where you call home.”

“Hop.” She sets down the blanket and ignores the smell of must that rises as she leans against the corner of the couch. “When you came back to Hawkins you were a mess. The drinking, the pills - “ she shakes her head as he starts to protest, her eyes focused on him. “I know about it all. The town is small, they talk. I’m not judging you, Jim. I’m saying I admire the man you’ve become. You built a place for El even after everything you went through with Sara. You gave me back Will, even when I was ready to give up.”

Hopper shifts minutely, his eyes focused on the floorboards. The sight of it tears at her knowing the memories that he’ll never shed. “And

now we're here, talking about buying a house, a ring tucked away somewhere - “

“Marry me,” he whispers, his eyes flying up to hers with an intensity that knocks the air from her lungs.

“You already know the answer,” she replies lowly, her shy smile growing.

“But I want you to say it,” he urges, coming to kneel before her. His gaze searches hers as he takes her hand in his. “Joyce, tell me you want to marry me. It doesn't have to be this week, or even this year, just tell me you want it eventually.”

She laughs at the dramatic act he's putting on, his efforts so over the top for him that she can't help it. The laughter is swallowed though when he smiles at her, the small grin growing on his face until his beard is split by teeth, his hands coming to her cheeks.

“Tell me, Joycie.” He presses a kiss to her lips and she reaches to run her hands up his shoulders and to his chin.

“I want to, Jim. I want to marry you.”

Notes for the Chapter:

swoon. come keep me company.

21. Chapter 21

He was never moving another box, ever. Again. Hopper's body was toast - laid out on the floor in the living room, boxes and half-arranged furniture scattered throughout the room strategically to hide him from the others. Setting his hat over his face he tried to settle his back muscles into something that wasn't as painful as it was minutes ago before he officially and totally gave up.

"Dad - " El groaned, coming to lay with her head across his belly. The move was unusual for her, his eyebrows rising below his cap, but he didn't have the energy to do much more than that. " - Are you sure it wouldn't be faster for me to *actually* help?"

God, he wanted to use her abilities. Badly. She could move trucks, he knew, so a couch wouldn't have been the struggle it was to get through the front door. But Joyce and him had talked to her about it already and they didn't want her abusing her powers in case Owens wasn't quite right on his diagnosis. Plus, a small part of him that was a bit too much like his father thought maybe it would be good for her to put in some hard work every once in a while.

"El," he chuckles, her head bouncing against him. "Keep your voice down or they'll find us."

"Hop, I can hear you," Joyce calls immediately from the kitchen where she was working on unpacking some of the dishware for dinner.

"Yeah, and you're not hidden, at all," Will announces from the staircase where he is able to see them past the boxes. El cackles as he comes down to join them, their bodies puddling on the floor as they lay there exhausted. Hopper takes the opportunity to run his hand through Will's hair affectionately, the boy glancing at him over his shoulder.

"I'm glad your mom said yes to this," he whispers conspiratorially to Will.

"I'm surprised she said yes to you, too," Will replies and Hopper

shoves him jokingly as the boy rolls around laughing. El turns on her side to face up towards them, the three of them catching each others eyes.

Hopper clears his throat and sits up, shrugging them off of him. "What can I say, I'm a hell of a negotiator. Plus, I think I got the better deal with you guys. Even if it did mean moving twice this year." Getting back to his feet, he reaches down and helps them up so that they can stumble into the kitchen together. He's the first to slide up to Joyce, his arms wrapping around her waist as he nips at her ear. Will groans and El laughs, coming to join them.

"Can you guys get a room already," Will chides as he hands the dishes to Joyce.

"Ugh, I don't want to know about that," El adds and scrunches up her nose. The two share a look that Hopper catches as he leans his forehead against the back of Joyce's neck. She leans into him and he laughs as the reaction.

"Come on, let's get the rest of this stuff put away so we can watch a movie and pig out on junk food," Hopper says and breaks away. The kids sigh heavily before returning to the front room, their footsteps dragging as they move more boxes up the stairs to their respective rooms.

"Don't you go laying back down in that box fort of yours, Hop," Joyce calls as he shifts onto one knee, half-hidden behind the faux wall of boxes. She catches his eye from the kitchen and he holds up a finger, curling it towards him before rising it to his lips. The smile that breaks across her lips makes his heart swoop as he moves two more boxes to block the view from the staircase. "No funny business," she scolds and lays down against his arm.

They stare at the ceiling, listening to the giggles and raucous chaos above them as Hopper pulls her into his side. "Did you think - " he whispers, as though there were secrets to keep now, after everything. "After Bob, and what happened with Will, did you think..." She looks at him then, can feel her eyes tracing over him.

When he doesn't continue, she turns until her cheek rests above his

heart, her hand tucked in his over his stomach. “That I would ever feel... Content? Happiness like this?” She pauses and tips her head to prop her chin on his ribs. “No. I figured I would go on, make it work like I always had and get through it. Maybe it would be better, but probably not.”

“Yeah,” he hums and runs his fingers across her cheek, eyes staring into hers.

“Did you - after... ?” She broaches quietly, unblinking. Joyce feels the breath hitch in his lungs, the exhale catch like a tear.

“God no.” The words are breathed out, ghosts floating around them. “I didn’t *want* to feel this again, after Sara. It felt like a betrayal to even think about it. But finding El... You... Something changed and I went all in. It doesn’t feel like it did before.”

“It’s like we’re different people now than we were. Like maybe - “

“All this terrible shit needed to happen to get here?”

“Yeah,” she paused at that, let it linger.

“Are you happy now?” He asks when her fingers squeeze his, the question terrifying and disarming. He’s happy - he knows it and feels it and it’s running through him like a fever - but still he needs the affirmation from her to make it real.

“You know, Hop, I’m starting to think I am.”

Notes for the Chapter:

This is it... For now at least. Thanks for playing!
Hopefully you found a little solace, a little kindness,
and that this brightened up your day. Happy 2018
loves.

22. the three times I said I love you

The three times I said *I love you* were not quite that clear. They were ripped and torn shreds of the words, but the meaning was there nonetheless. It never really came out in that put together way that made it obvious, but I think you understood. You always did. That's why I never thought I had to tell you.

The first time I said *I love you* it was snowing and you were late shutting down your till at Benny's. Your hair was frazzled and your lips were chapped and you were pissed at the goddamn world and there was nothing anyone could do to fix it. I drove you home that night and let you cry against my shoulder about the boy who'd left you pregnant and alone, working two jobs just to make ends meet. I didn't tell you outright - I couldn't - but I tried to show you in the way my arms wrapped tight around you, in the way my lips pressed to the crown of your head.

I didn't say the words but I felt them. They were heavy in my chest and they were only for you. I didn't tell you that *I love you* but we both felt it before you put on your brave face and walked through your front door with your head held high. I left for Vietnam the next day and all I could think about was the fact that I didn't tell you *I love you* , just so you wouldn't wait for me.

I told you three times that *I love you* . The words weren't a shout from the rooftop but murky and faded, echoed in my heart and my head and my soul. They never really made it to my lips, but I knew that you knew. You always did. That's why I never thought I had to say it out loud.

The second time I said *I love you* you'd pulled me from death, cut me loose and saved me from myself. Figuratively, literally, metaphorically - every way. I was in over my head but by your side it was always clear that we needed to work together to save what we held dear. When you lost something that you had relied on to make you happy, that's when I said it. Not with words - never with words - but with steady silence by your side. In the way I stayed with you and helped ease your mind as you wrapped that blanket tighter around your shoulders. I said it in the way you don't actually have to

say it at all.

I didn't say *I love you* but I know you saw it in my eyes. The truth was plain as day and I saw it in your eyes too. But it was too soon to actually say it, too soon after you lost that sparkle in your eye, so we didn't say a thing and we kept moving forward, fighting together for the future that we knew would make us whole. I didn't say *I love you* because you were still hurting, still grieving, and I didn't want to tarnish your pain with something as messy as me.

It was three times that I said *I love you* without saying a word. I remember them because they were moments where I saw you without the armour you carry around, the words prone to bounce off if you weren't listening in just the right way. So I didn't say it aloud, but I said it to you anyways.

The third time I said *I love you* I was breaking a rule I set for myself. It was in your bed with your head on my shoulder, your nightmare dragging you under as I fought to bring you back to the surface. You held onto me so tightly that you left bruises, your small frame fighting desperately and viciously against the monsters I couldn't save you from. I wrapped you up in me, limbs and breaths and soft touches until your eyes were clear and they finally met mine in the dim light that came in through your window.

I didn't say it but I pressed it into your skin, like a brand, like a tattoo. I wanted you to keep forever. We didn't say a thing but we never could actually admit anything that really mattered. I wouldn't dare tell you *I love you* but I know you felt it when we laid together that night, joined and lost in each other. I know you knew it too, even though I was breaking my rule by staying the night in your bed.

I've told you *I love you* three times and I know you've heard it. I've told you *I love you* and you said it too, in the looks and smiles and small ways that you've held me together all these years. But now I'm saying it out loud. Just in case you missed it those times. *I love you*. I've loved you. And I don't think now that I've said it out loud that I'll ever be able to stop.

Notes for the Chapter:

A drabble for Starmaammke on her terrible no good
very bad evening.